



THE
GREAT
COURSES®

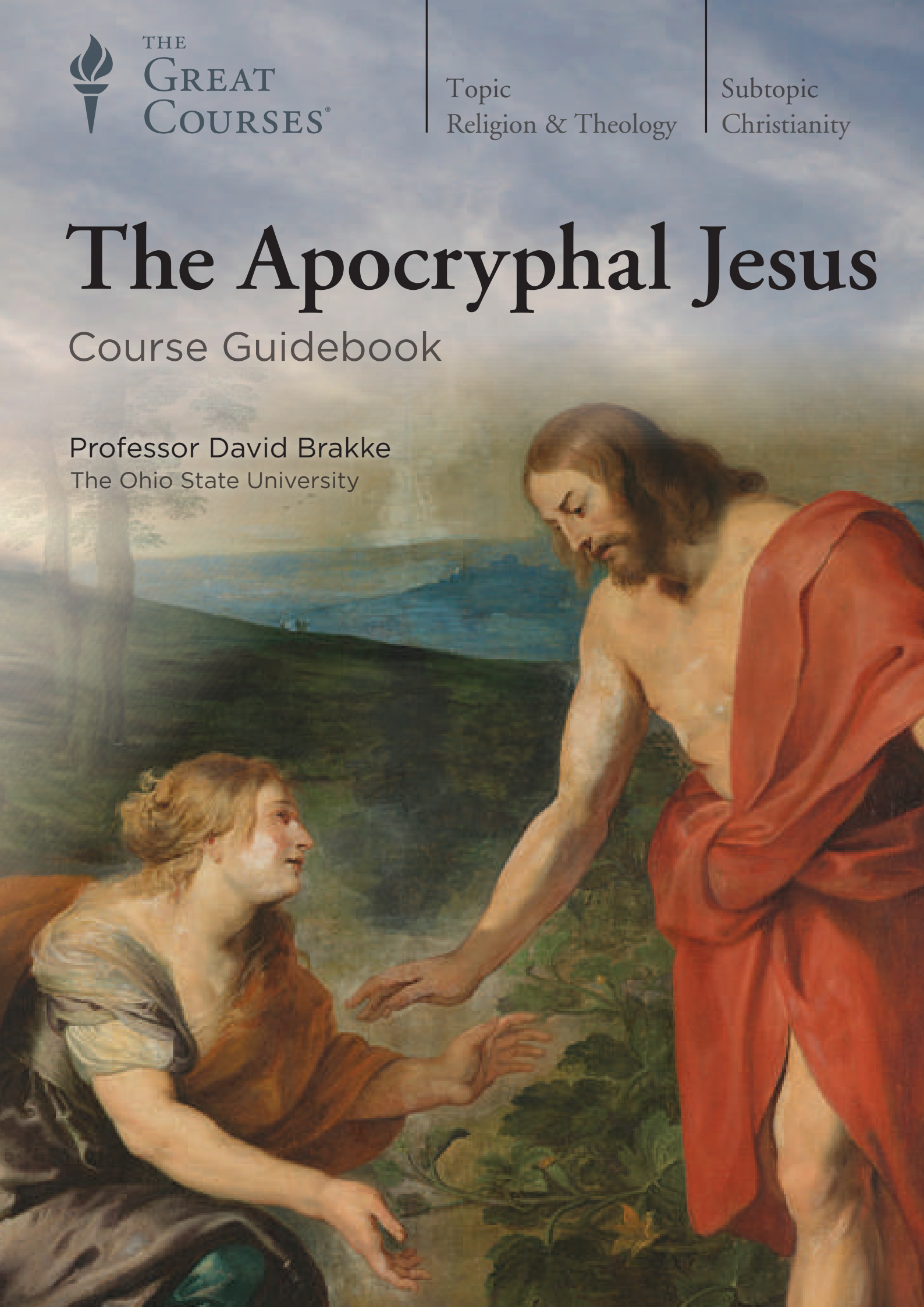
Topic
Religion & Theology

Subtopic
Christianity

The Apocryphal Jesus

Course Guidebook

Professor David Brakke
The Ohio State University



PUBLISHED BY:

THE GREAT COURSES

Corporate Headquarters

4840 Westfields Boulevard, Suite 500

Chantilly, Virginia 20151-2299

Phone: 1-800-832-2412

Fax: 703-378-3819

www.thegreatcourses.com

Copyright © The Teaching Company, 2017

Printed in the United States of America

This book is in copyright. All rights reserved.

Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above,
no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in
or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted,
in any form, or by any means
(electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise),
without the prior written permission of
The Teaching Company.

David Brakke, Ph.D.



Joe R. Engle Chair in the History of Christianity
and Professor of History
The Ohio State University

David Brakke is the Joe R. Engle Chair in the History of Christianity and a Professor of History at The Ohio State University, where he has taught since 2012. After receiving his B.A. in English with highest distinction from the University of Virginia, he received his M.Div. from Harvard Divinity School and his Ph.D. in Religious Studies from Yale University. He taught for 19 years (from 1993 to 2012) in the Department of Religious Studies at Indiana University, where he was department chair for five years.

Professor Brakke has published extensively on the history and literature of ancient Christianity, especially Egyptian Christianity, early monasticism, the formation of the biblical canon, and Gnosticism. He has edited and translated several ancient works that survive in Coptic and Syriac. Professor Brakke is a member of an international team of scholars producing the first unified critical edition and translation of the works of the monk Shenoute of Atripe (348–465), the greatest native writer of Coptic. He is also preparing a revised edition of Bentley Layton’s *The Gnostic Scriptures*.

At Indiana University, Professor Brakke received recognition for his teaching and research, including the Outstanding Junior Faculty Award. He has held several important fellowships, including ones from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation. He has held visiting positions at Concordia College, the University of Chicago, and Williams College.

Professor Brakke is the author of *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism*; *Demons and the Making of the Monk: Spiritual Combat in Early Christianity*; *The Gnostics: Myth, Ritual, and Diversity in Early Christianity*; and *Introduction to Christianity*, with Mary Jo Weaver. He has coedited six volumes of scholarly essays and contributed nearly 40 articles to professional journals and volumes. From 2005 to 2015, he served as editor of the *Journal of Early Christian Studies*.

Professor Brakke’s previous Great Course is *Gnosticism: From Nag Hammadi to the Gospel of Judas*.

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION

David Brakke, Ph.D.....	i
Course Scope	1

LECTURE 1

The Influence of Apocrypha.....	4
---------------------------------	---

LECTURE 2

Jesus and Mary in the <i>Proto-Gospel of James</i>	12
--	----

LECTURE 3

Young Jesus in the <i>Infancy Gospel of Thomas</i>	22
--	----

LECTURE 4

Joseph and the Magi in the Apocrypha	30
--	----

LECTURE 5

The Apocrypha and the Cult of Mary	40
--	----

LECTURE 6

Lost Gospels and Fragments..... 50

LECTURE 7

Sayings of Jesus from the *Gospel of Thomas*..... 62

LECTURE 8

Jesus's Statements beyond the Gospels..... 68

LECTURE 9

Conversations with the Living Jesus.....76

LECTURE 10

The *Gospel of Judas's* Gnostic Vision..... 86

LECTURE 11

The *Gospel of Peter* and the Talking Cross 94

LECTURE 12

The Apocrypha and Pilate's Sanctification.....104

LECTURE 13

Dialogues with the Risen Jesus..... 116

LECTURE 14

Hope and Adventure in the *Acts of John* 126

LECTURE 15

Social Disruption in the *Acts of Paul*..... 136

LECTURE 16

Thecla: Independent Woman of the Apocrypha144

LECTURE 17

Miracles and Magic in the *Acts of Peter*..... 154

LECTURE 18

Peter versus Paul in the *Pseudo-Clementines*..... 164

LECTURE 19

The *Acts of Thomas* and the Mission to India..... 174

LECTURE 20

Spiritual Love in the *Acts of Andrew*..... 184

LECTURE 21

Forged Letters of Jesus and the Apostles..... 192

LECTURE 22

Revelations That Didn't Make the Bible 202

LECTURE 23

Tours of Hell before Dante..... 212

LECTURE 24

Apocrypha after the New Testament..... 222

SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL

Bibliography 232

Image Credits 244



Course Scope

An astonishing variety of early Christian writings survive outside the canon of the New Testament. In many cases, these works look like, draw from, and expand upon New Testament writings. The New Testament includes gospels about Jesus, an “acts” of his apostles, letters that early Christians wrote, and a revelation of future events. Writings of all these kinds now make up what has come to be called the apocryphal New Testament. Contrary to popular belief, not all of these writings are heretical, but they do reveal the amazing diversity of ancient and medieval Christianity and the vitality of Christian storytelling over the centuries. Some ideas that we might think come from the New Testament—that Jesus’s brothers were Joseph’s sons from a previous marriage, that Peter was crucified upside-down—actually first appear in apocryphal literature.

After we examine the origin and meaning of early Christian apocrypha, we’ll explore writings that expand upon the gospel accounts of Jesus, his family, and his death and resurrection. Some apocryphal gospels provide new information about the birth and childhood of Jesus and about the background of Mary, his mother, while others fill out the stories of Joseph, Jesus’s alleged human father, and of the magi,

the wise men from the East who visited the Christ child. We'll discover how some texts of dubious orthodoxy lie behind the idea of the Virgin Mary's dormition and bodily assumption to heaven, now official Roman Catholic doctrine. The famous *Gospel of Thomas* presents sayings of Jesus not in the New Testament; the *Gospel of Judas* reports the Gnostic teachings that Jesus shared before his crucifixion with the disciple who betrayed him; and the *Gospel of Peter* provides the only account of the moment when Jesus emerged from his tomb. In the *Gospel of Nicodemus*, Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor who condemned Jesus to death, becomes a believer in Jesus's divinity. Together, these diverse writings show how Christians used stories about Jesus, his family members, and his disciples to address the concerns of their time and to express new theological ideas.

Next we'll turn to the apocryphal acts of the apostles—novels that recount the adventures of the apostles after Jesus's resurrection. These tales about John, Paul, Peter, Andrew, and others are filled with entertaining plot elements like talking animals, resurrections from the dead, flying magicians, and dangerous cannibals. But they also contain historical evidence for the diversity of early Christian thought on topics like the divinity of Christ, the roles of women in church and society, wealth and poverty, and Christianity's relationship to the Jewish tradition.

We'll conclude the course by looking at letters and revelations attributed to the first apostles. Many early Christians read a third letter of Paul to the Corinthians, in addition to the two in the New Testament, and someone forged correspondence between Paul and the great Roman philosopher Seneca. Newly discovered revelations to Peter and Paul teach “heretical” ideas about God and Christ, while other apocalypses attributed to them narrate vivid tours of hell and the punishments that await sinners there—visions that much later inspired the great Dante.

Even after the New Testament was defined in the 4th century, Christians have continued to read and write texts that revise and expand on the texts and stories that it contains. Apocryphal literature provides a fascinating window into the diversity of ancient Christianity and the endless inventiveness of the Christian imagination. ■

LECTURE I

The Influence of Apocrypha

The apocryphal New Testament, also known as early Christian apocrypha, is a collection of writings not selected to become part of the official New Testament. Written during the first four or five centuries of Christianity—the same time the writings in the New Testament were being composed, collected, and made official scripture—the apocrypha provide insight into early Christian beliefs, practices, and controversies that would otherwise have been lost. This lecture will introduce you to early Christian apocrypha—what they are, how they relate to the New Testament, and why they're worth studying.



The New Testament

Early Christian Apocrypha

- » The term “apocrypha” comes from Greek. It is the plural of the singular *apocryphon*, which means “hidden” or “secret.” The writings referred to as early Christian apocrypha or the apocryphal New Testament are not read in Christian worship services as authoritative scripture.
- » In contrast, the writings that are in the Christian Bible, whether Old Testament or New, are “canonical,” which means “in accordance with official rules or norms” or “authorized.” The New Testament canon is a list of 27 authorized books that can be read at worship services. They are also fully authoritative when Christians need to formulate doctrines and make ethical decisions.
- » Unlike the canon of the New Testament, the apocryphal New Testament is not a set list. It’s not an official category of any Christian church. In fact, scholars argue about how the apocrypha should be defined and what should be included in it.
- » It is important to distinguish the apocryphal New Testament from another, clearer set of writings often called the Old Testament Apocrypha or just the Apocrypha. Containing works such as 1 and 2 Maccabees, Tobit, and Sirach, the Old Testament Apocrypha are books that aren’t included in the Protestant Old Testament, but are included in the Old Testaments of Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox Christians.

Relationship to the New Testament

- » During the first centuries of the Christian movement, Christian writers produced lots of texts. These writings came in many different genres. The first Christian writings were letters—for example, letters

that the apostle Paul wrote in the 50s of the 1st century to small congregations of new Christians in cities like Corinth, Thessalonica, Philippi, and Rome.

- » In the following decades, more Christian letters followed, from leaders like Clement of Rome and Ignatius of Antioch. So popular was the letter genre that forged letters appeared—letters falsely written in the names of prominent apostles like Paul, Peter, and James. Later readers accepted many of these as actually coming from their purported authors.
- » Around the year 70, an anonymous Christian produced the first gospel, or proclamation of Jesus's ministry, teachings, death, and resurrection. It did not narrate Jesus's entire life; rather, it told about Jesus's preaching and miracles, and then it devoted special attention to his last week and execution. Later it was called the Gospel of Mark.
- » Soon thereafter, new gospels appeared. Some authors followed and even copied from Mark, such as Matthew and Luke. Other gospels look like Mark, even if their authors did not copy from it, such as John and Peter. *The Gospel of Thomas* simply recorded sayings of Jesus. A gospel attributed to James and another one to Thomas described Jesus's mother, Mary, or Jesus's childhood. More gospels, such as the *Gospel of Mary*, recorded teachings that Jesus gave his disciples after he rose from the dead.
- » The author of Luke went on to follow his gospel with a book called the Acts of the Apostles, which told what especially Peter and Paul did in the years after Jesus's death and resurrection. Inspired by this book, Christian authors produced acts of individual apostles, such as *Acts of Peter* and *Acts of John*.

- » Still other Christians wrote apocalypses or revelations, accounts of divine visions that were revealed to them by God or Jesus. The Revelation to John was written in the 90s, but we have revelations also to the apostles Peter and Paul, as well as to an early Roman Christian named Hermas.
- » In addition to letters, gospels, apostolic acts, and revelations, Christians wrote sermons, church order handbooks, theological treatises, hymns, and so on. There is a lot of early Christian literature that survives, and we know the titles of numerous texts that stopped being copied and so have been lost.
- » As Christian texts multiplied, some authors tried to set their own works apart as special by calling them apocrypha. This designation marked a work as esoteric, reserved only for advanced Christians, and thus particularly valuable.
- » When these self-identified apocryphal texts were written, during the 100s, there was not yet any New Testament. Nonetheless, some works had become widely accepted by Christians as authoritative—above all, the letters of Paul, and one or more of the gospels. Labeling your work as apocryphal was a way to make your book stand out in the crowd. It also explained why, if this book was written by the apostle James, no one had seen it until, say, the 180s.
- » Also during the 100s, some Christians were claiming that they had secret or hidden teachings of Jesus. In addition to whatever you might read in, for example, Paul's Epistle to the Romans or in the Gospel of Mark, Paul and Jesus had taught additional, higher concepts to special students, and these secret ideas had come down through oral traditions. Self-proclaimed apocryphal books were a written version of such claims to higher, esoteric knowledge.

- » Some Christian leaders, however, began to push back against the entire idea that Christ or the apostles transmitted secret teaching or wrote apocryphal books. Irenaeus, the bishop of Lyons in France in the 170s and 180s, declared that neither Jesus nor the apostles taught anything secretly. Everything that was essential for salvation they taught openly to their followers. Christian doctrine is available publicly in the church, and bishops guarantee the truth and accuracy of this official teaching.
- » In the same way, Irenaeus denounced writings that were called apocryphal. He and Tertullian of Carthage, an author of the early 200s, called Christian writings that they found dangerous or heretical “apocryphal and spurious.” A secret writing, they said, cannot be a reliable source of true Christian doctrine.
- » Around the year 200, Christians like Irenaeus and Tertullian had the idea of a New Testament, but they did not yet have the New Testament itself. It was not until 367 that a Christian leader, Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria, listed the precise 27 books that make up today’s New Testament. At the same time, Athanasius denounced what he called apocryphal books. Heretics invented apocryphal books, Athanasius claimed, and no Christian should trust a single word in them.
- » Turning the idea of the New Testament into a reality was no easy task. Christians produced a lot of writings during the first two centuries, and some of them were forged, falsely written in the names of the apostles. Not only that, but these many writings did not all teach the same thing. Early Christian gospels and letters disagree with one another on small matters, such as the precise wording of a parable of Jesus, and on big questions, such as who Jesus was and how he

saves people. It became important for Christian leaders of all kinds to sort through this literature.

- » During the 100s and 200s, Christians began to evaluate and list Christian writings for purposes of research, teaching, and worship. A consensus began to emerge about certain core texts—the four Gospels, Acts, the letters of Paul—but real clarity did not come until 367, when Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria devised his list of 27 works.

The Value of Early Christian Apocrypha

- » When modern historians and publishers decided to create collections of early Christian writings not in the New Testament, their choice of the word “apocrypha” was both good and bad. On the positive side, it accurately communicates that these are works not part of the official New Testament and thus not usually read at worship service. On the negative side, it can suggest heresy or illegitimacy, when in fact many such works are not at all heretical, and they are no more or less legitimate than any other works written by early Christians. They just didn’t make it into the New Testament.
- » Lots of early Christian writings aren’t in the New Testament, including the writings of Clement, Tertullian, Irenaeus, and Origen. However, scholars limit the category of early Christian apocrypha to narratives about Jesus, his family, the apostles, and other New Testament characters, as well as letters and apocalyptic visions attributed to these figures. These texts often expand upon New Testament texts or fill in gaps in what the New Testament tells us. But of course, many were written before there was a New Testament, so they simply tell stories about or claim to come from people like Jesus, Mary Magdalene, Peter, the Virgin Mary, and so on.



- » This literature doesn't really constitute a shadow or alternative New Testament, but we can approach it in that way. The New Testament consists of the four gospels about Jesus, the Acts of the Apostles, letters, and then the Revelation to John. Similarly, the early Christian apocrypha consist of gospels and other narratives about Jesus and his family, the acts of various apostles, letters that purport to come from apostles or even Jesus himself, and revelations that apostles received.
- » Historians read this literature not because it gives us historical information about Jesus or the apostles that we can't get from the New Testament, but because it gives us access to the diversity of Christian beliefs about Jesus and the apostles during the early centuries. Moreover, through subsequent literature and art, many of the apocryphal writings have shaped how Christians think about Jesus, the Virgin Mary, and the apostles, even if they aren't aware of it. It's no exaggeration to say that the apocryphal Jesus—or, rather, the apocryphal Jesuses—are no less historical and nearly as influential as the Jesuses of the New Testament.

LECTURE 2

Jesus and Mary in the *Proto-Gospel of James*

The *Proto-Gospel of James* is an apocryphal gospel that supplements the Gospels of Matthew and Luke by filling in gaps, resolving discrepancies, and creating a single story from two different accounts. As you will learn in this lecture, the *Proto-Gospel of James* also provides homely details that make the story of Jesus's birth more relatable and communicates effectively the profound meaning of the Incarnation.



The Holy Family

Supplementation and Correction

.....

- » The *Proto-Gospel of James* probably originated in the late 2nd century. It became hugely popular, especially among Christians in the eastern Mediterranean world. The *Proto-Gospel of James* mostly describes events that happened before the New Testament Gospels begin—that is, most of it is about the birth and childhood of Mary, her marriage to Joseph, and the discovery of her pregnancy.
- » At the most basic level, the *Proto-Gospel of James* illustrates how some early apocryphal texts fill in the gaps in the texts of the New Testament and try to resolve some of the puzzles or questions that the New Testament writings pose.
- » Of the four Gospels, only Matthew and Luke provide accounts of Jesus's birth, and they both emphasize that Jesus's mother, Mary, was a virgin when she gave birth. In all four Gospels, the mother of Jesus appears during his ministry and is a witness to his death, but his reputed father Joseph does not appear.
- » Naturally, Christians wanted to know more about Mary: Who were her parents? Why was she betrothed to Joseph? What made her so special as to be given the honor of being Jesus's mother? The *Proto-Gospel of James* answers these questions by describing Mary's birth to Anna and Joachim, her engagement and marriage to Joseph, and her pious and sheltered childhood.
- » And what happened to Joseph? Why doesn't he show up during Jesus's ministry? The *Proto-Gospel of James* explains this by depicting Joseph as a widower who is much older than Mary. It makes sense, then, that Joseph died before Jesus began his ministry. The age

difference also explains in part why Joseph wasn't interested in having sex with Mary.

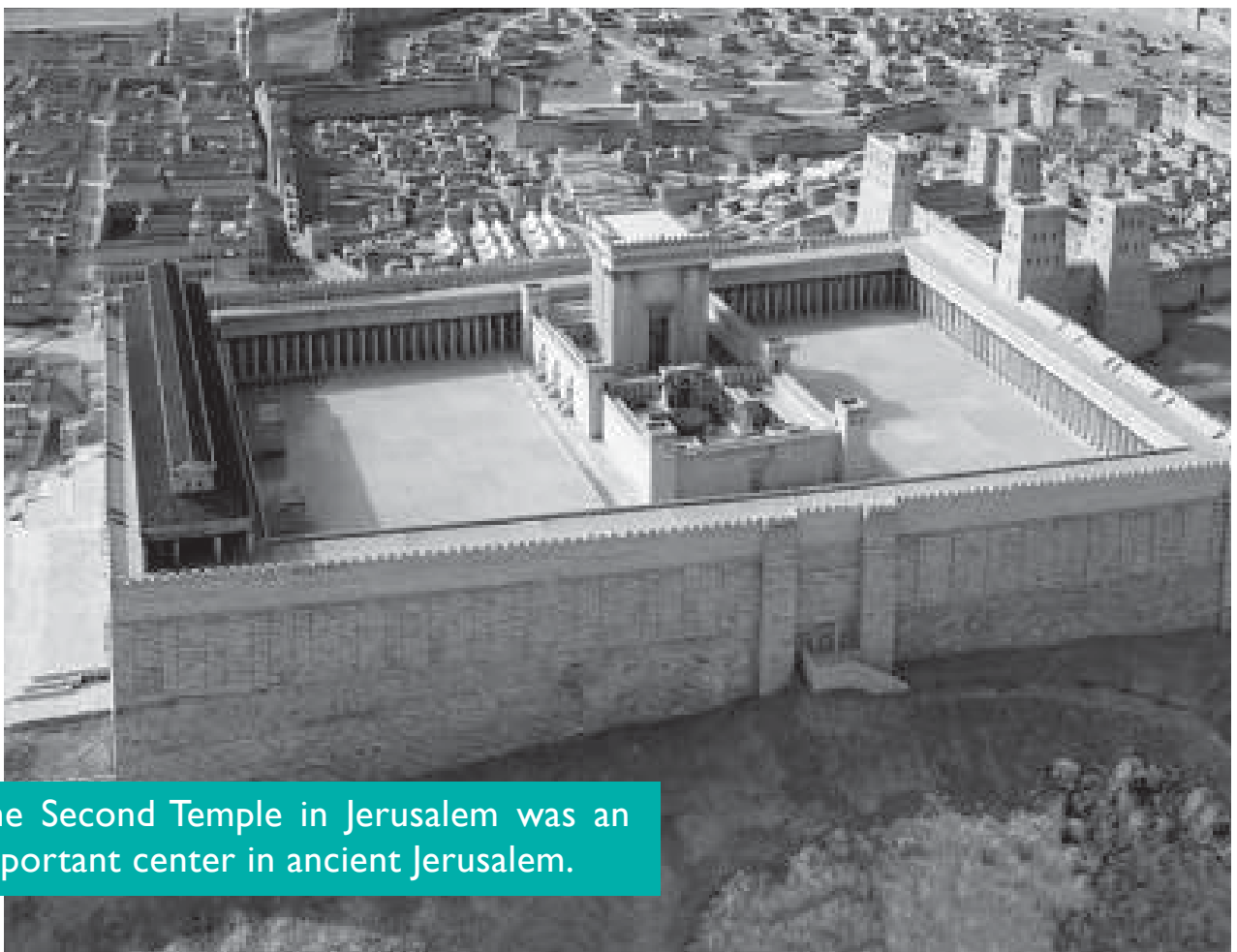
- » Not only does the *Proto-Gospel of James* fill in gaps in the biblical accounts, it also harmonizes them and resolves any contradictions between them, thus making it possible for readers to accept the accounts in both Matthew and Luke as true.

The Old Testament and Jewish Tradition

- » The first major theme that stands out in the *Proto-Gospel of James* is the strong connection of Jesus and his family to the Old Testament and Jewish tradition.
- » To begin with, the story of Mary's birth sounds a lot like the births of important characters in the Old Testament. When the *Proto-Gospel of James* opens, Mary's parents Anna and Joachim are a long-married couple who have produced no children. Joachim goes out into the wilderness and fasts for 40 days and nights. Anna laments her fate and prays to God for a child. Finally, an angel appears to Anna and promises her a child who will be known all over the world. Anna vows to devote her child to God's service.
- » Anna and Joachim stand in a long biblical tradition of childless couples whom the Lord eventually blesses with a child. The first and greatest example is Abraham and Sarah, who finally give birth to Isaac after much hardship and prayer. But a better parallel is provided by Hannah, the second wife of Elkanah in the first chapters of 1 Samuel. She too laments her barren state and prays to God for a child. She too vows to devote any child she would bear to the Lord. By the Lord's favor, Hannah gives birth to Samuel. Once Samuel is

weaned, she presents Samuel to the Lord, and the boy lives with the priest Eli in the Temple. Samuel grows up to be a great prophet.

- » The parallels with the story of Mary's birth in the *Proto-Gospel of James* are clear. Like Hannah, Anna prays to God at length and devotes her child to God. And like Samuel, Mary goes to live in the Temple as a little girl. From then on, the Temple and its priests are at the center of the narrative.
- » The author of the *Proto-Gospel of James* goes great lengths to make his story sound biblical, and he shows Mary and Joseph as deeply embedded in a Jewish tradition that they respect and honor. This was a strong and important message for Christians in the late 2nd century. By this time, the vast majority of Christians were not ethnically Jewish; they were Gentiles, former pagans. Most had decided that they did not have to follow the Jewish Law to be saved.



The Second Temple in Jerusalem was an important center in ancient Jerusalem.



- » This raised the question of the relevance of the Old Testament and Jewish tradition to Christians. Do Christians even need the Old Testament as scripture? One prominent Christian, named Marcion, argued that they did not. The salvation that Christ brought, Marcion argued, was something completely new, wholly different from the Law found in the Jewish Scripture.
- » We can understand the *Proto-Gospel of James* as one response to views like Marcion's. Jesus, Mary, and Joseph were all faithful Jews, and their story echoes significant themes of the Old Testament. The *Proto-Gospel of James* emphasized the deep roots of Christianity in the Old Testament and the traditions of Judaism at a time when some Christians questioned those ties.



Mary's Virginit

.....

- » A second important theme of the *Proto-Gospel of James* is Mary's virginity. The author takes great pains to make clear that Mary was absolutely a virgin, completely pure and sacred.
- » The *Proto-Gospel of James* depicts Joseph as having children from a previous marriage. In this way, the author explains why the New Testament Gospels refer to Jesus as having siblings and why James was known as the Lord's brother. Not only was Mary a virgin when she gave birth to Jesus, she was a virgin her entire life and had no other children. We see here the beginning of the idea of Mary's perpetual or eternal virginity.

- » There are probably several reasons for this heavy emphasis on Mary's virginity. One is probably apologetic—that is, the author seeks to defend Mary's virginity against critics of Christianity who questioned it. We know that by the late 2nd century, pagan and Jewish opponents of Christianity were attacking the idea of Jesus's birth to a virgin.
- » Meanwhile, Christians themselves were increasingly valuing virginity as a way of showing special devotion to God. In 1 Corinthians, the apostle Paul had expressed hope that Christians who were single could remain celibate, as he himself was. Because he expected Christ to return soon and bring the present world to an end, Paul recommended living without the distractions of marriage and family. Even as Christians lost the expectation that the end of the world was coming soon, they continued to think that giving up marriage and family could be a great way of expressing one's complete devotion to prayer and service to God, especially for women.
- » Mary's virginity also shows the divine nature of Christ's birth, and thus the divine origin of Christ himself. Mary is a wholly pure and sacred vessel for the arrival of God's presence in the world. The *Proto-Gospel of James* certainly sees her as analogous to the Temple in Jerusalem. Because the Temple is holy, sacred, and unviolated, it can shelter the presence of the Lord. Similarly, because Mary is holy, sacred, and unviolated, she can shelter the presence of the Lord's son.

The Special Nature of Christ's Birth

- » The third important theme of the *Proto-Gospel of James* is the special nature of Christ's birth, which it describes as cosmic in significance.

- » When Joseph finds the midwife who will assist Mary, he brings her to the cave where Mary is staying with his sons, but they do not enter. Instead, here is how the *Proto-Gospel of James* describes what happened:

They stood at the place of the cave, and a luminous cloud overshadowed the cave. The midwife said, “My soul is magnified today, for my eyes have seen something incredible: salvation has been born to Israel.” And immediately the cloud drew back from the cave, and a great light appeared in the cave such that their eyes could not bear it. And after a little bit that light drew back, until an infant appeared. It came and took hold of the breast from its mother Mary.

- » This is hardly an ordinary birth, with struggle and pain. Instead, the infant appears from behind a luminous cloud and out of a blinding light. One cannot help but think of the star that will now guide the magi to visit the Christ child. Jesus comes to earth though a manifestation of light.
- » But there’s even more than this. Earlier, when Joseph leaves Mary and his sons in the cave to fetch the midwife, the narrative abruptly shifts to the first person, and Joseph himself tells what he sees:

But I myself, Joseph, was walking, and I was not walking. I looked up to the celestial sphere of heaven, and I saw it standing still, and into the air and I saw it frozen, and the birds of the sky were still. And I looked down to the earth, and I saw a bowl set for workers who were reclined to eat, and their hands were in

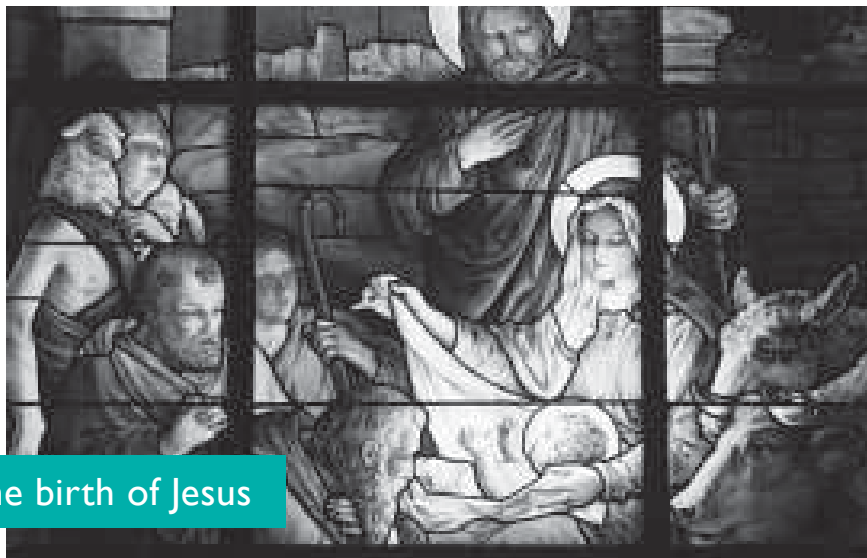
the bowl. And those who were chewing were not chewing, and those who were taking from the bowl were not lifting up, and those who were bringing food to their mouths were not bringing food to their mouths. Rather all their faces were looking up. And I saw sheep being herded, but the sheep stood still. And the shepherd had raised his hand to strike them, but his hand stood in the air. And I looked down at the flow of the river, and I saw goats, and their mouths were suspended over the water, but they were not drinking. And all of a sudden all things returned to their course.

- » Joseph sees time stop. The heavenly sphere stops moving, and everything around him is frozen. Time stopping for the birth of a great divine being is found in other sacred texts. Such is said about the birth of Athena in a Homeric hymn, and about the birth of the Buddha in some literature. What's so compelling about this scene is the detail in which the author describes life stopping in a very particular rural setting. We find workers paused in the middle of eating, herded sheep standing still, and drinking goats frozen in their actions.
- » This remarkable tableau captures the amazing paradox of the Christian understanding of Christ's birth. The maker of the entire universe, indeed the divine power that undergirds all that exists, becomes uniquely embodied and placed in this small corner of rural Palestine. For a moment, time itself comes to a halt, and a little cave in the middle of nowhere welcomes the Son of God.

LECTURE 3

Young Jesus in the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*

Aside from one scene in the Gospel of Luke, the New Testament Gospels tell us nothing about Jesus's childhood. The picture of a young Jesus is more fully developed, however, in a strange but fascinating early Christian text usually called the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*. This apocryphal gospel, which is the subject of this lecture, contains stories about Jesus between the ages of 5 and 12.



The birth of Jesus

Presentation of Jesus

.....

- » Some stories in the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* present Jesus as an amazing divine child: He makes sparrows out of clay and then brings them to life. He raises people from the dead. He heals his brother James when he is bitten by a poisonous snake. He miraculously makes a board of wood grow to the length that Joseph needs for one of his carpentry jobs. He teaches the Law and delivers powerful speeches.
- » Other stories, however, present young Jesus as something of a holy terror: When a boy uses a tree branch to ruin some pools of water that Jesus has made, Jesus tells him to wither up like a tree, and he does. When another boy runs into Jesus's shoulder, Jesus curses him, and the boy dies. Jesus frustrates one of his teachers so much that the teacher hits him on the head. In retaliation, Jesus curses the teacher, who falls to the ground and becomes comatose. At one point, Joseph tells Mary not to let Jesus go outside the house because, Joseph says, "people who make him angry die."
- » Modern historians have sometimes reacted to the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* with disgust. They have called its stories grotesque and bizarre. But it seems to have been popular in the Middle Ages, because we have manuscripts of it in Greek, Syriac, Latin, Georgian, Ethiopic, Slavonic, and Arabic. Paintings of the boy Jesus bringing clay birds to life decorate medieval churches, and there is even a reference to it in the Koran.
- » More recently, many scholars have tried to make sense of this peculiar but entertaining text, but they don't always agree on how to understand it. Would ancient people have reacted negatively to a young Jesus who curses and kills people? Did they see him as like

other children? Is all this just the Christian imagination at work, or is there some deeper message?

Problems of Interpretation

.....

- » There are many complications involved in interpreting the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*. The earliest manuscripts that we have come from the 5th and 6th centuries, but they are in Latin and Syriac. The original language of the gospel was almost certainly Greek, but the earliest Greek manuscript is from the 11th century. Moreover, the manuscripts do not contain all the same stories, and sometimes the stories are in different orders. As a result, there's probably no way to identify the earliest version of the gospel, precisely what stories that version contained, and in what order.
- » Still, there are a few things we can say: The first version of the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* was probably written down in the 2nd century, because some authors and texts from that period show knowledge of stories about Jesus learning the alphabet that come from this gospel. It's likely, however, that individual stories about Jesus as a child continued to be invented and revised both orally and in written form over centuries.
- » It would be fun to think of the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* as the earliest example of Christian literature for children, but most historians reject this idea. The basic problem with it is that we don't have any other examples of such children's literature, whether Christian or not, from the ancient Mediterranean world.
- » We do, however, have written accounts of the childhood deeds of other famous heroes in ancient times, such as Hercules, Alexander the Great, and Plato. The authors of these tales do not present their child



Jesus and children is a very popular theme.

heroes as realistic children. Rather, they depict the children as already showing the virtues and powers that they would display as adults. In other words, child Hercules is just like adult Hercules; he does the same things as adult Hercules, but in contexts involving children.

- » This means that the young Jesus we meet in the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* is likely not meant to be a realistic depiction of a childish or less mature Jesus. Rather, he is an idealized projection of the adult Jesus back into childhood. This is a work aimed at adults, and it shows that, already as a child, Jesus displayed the powers and character traits that he would have as an adult.
- » One scholar has pointed out that Jesus gets angry in the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, even though ancient writers, Christian and non-Christian alike, agreed that anger is a terrible vice. This scholar has argued, therefore, that the first people to tell stories about Jesus getting angry were probably critics of Christianity. These opponents of Christianity told stories about Jesus being angry to discredit Jesus and show that he was not wise or virtuous—and certainly not divine.

- » One possibility, then, is that the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* is the work of a Christian author trying to mitigate such criticism. You may have heard that Jesus got angry, the author is saying, but he did this only as a child, not as an adult. Moreover, the author tries to explain Jesus's anger in several ways. There are parallels, for example, with stories in both the Old and New Testaments. Readers may have thus understood Jesus's behavior as indeed based on anger, but somehow in accord with Scripture.
- » This is an interesting hypothesis, but it is ultimately unconvincing. To begin with, if the author really did want to defend Jesus, it probably would have been more effective not to retell stories of Jesus being angry, but to show Jesus in situations where ordinary children would have gotten angry, but Jesus did not. In addition, it's not clear that everyone in antiquity, particularly ordinary people, would have been offended by Jesus's anger.
- » A final way of looking at the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* is that it is about children, but is meant for adults. For example, in the story of the boy running into Jesus's shoulder, maybe adults would not have seen the collision as just an accident. Maybe they would have understood this encounter to have taken place in some athletic competition. Athletic competitions were a big part of growing up for boys in antiquity, and cursing was a big part of such competitions.

The Power of Jesus's Word

.....

- » There are many ways to interpret the strange stories of the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*: It echoes the gospels of the New Testament, it idealizes the child Jesus as already having the powers and characteristics of a divine prophet, it answers critics of Christianity,

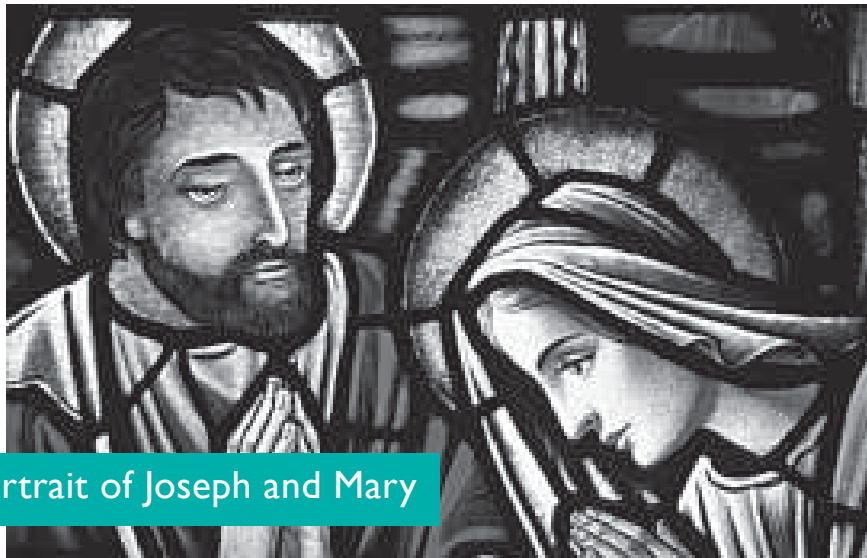
it invites Christians to imagine Jesus as a child like they were and yet as greater than they are—as God.

- » There are merits to all these ways of looking at the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, and it's fine to imagine multiple meanings for the stories it contains. Nevertheless, the gospel does have a theme that runs through all its episodes: the power of Jesus's word. When Jesus speaks, things happen. Children wither, die, or come to life. More than once, astonished people declare, "His every word is a work that happens!"
- » Even more, Jesus is God's Word, for he was born before this world came into being. As the Gospel of John says, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." And all things came into being through this Word of God. And this Word of God was made flesh and became this five-year-old boy, whose every word becomes a work that happens.
- » The *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* is a powerful statement of Christian belief in the incarnation of God's Word in a human being, even a child. Children must learn to speak and to write and to communicate effectively, but not this child. This child is the Word of God, a word that brings life—and death.

LECTURE 4

Joseph and the Magi in the Apocrypha

In the early days of Christianity, Jesus and the Virgin Mary were the primary subjects of Christian devotion and storytelling. Beginning in the 6th century, however, Christian apocryphal literature increasingly began focusing on the characters of Joseph and the magi. This lecture examines these legendary narratives, which expand upon biblical accounts to entertain readers, teach moral lessons, and make theological points about death and religious diversity.



Portrait of Joseph and Mary

Joseph Comes Alive

.....

- » In the New Testament, Joseph never speaks. Even in the Gospel of Matthew's birth narrative, which makes Joseph the main character, Joseph never says a word. He simply receives revelations from angels in dreams, and he does what they tell him to do.
- » In the *Proto-Gospel of James*, however, Joseph comes to life. The book introduces the crucial new idea that Joseph was an old widower, with children from his previous marriage, at the time he became engaged to Mary. This explains several things in the New Testament Gospels: Because he was much older, Joseph must have died when Jesus was a teenager or in his twenties, and that is why he never shows up during Jesus's ministry. As an older widower, Joseph would not have been interested in sex with his much younger bride, and thus Mary's perpetual virginity is more understandable. And the brothers and sisters of Jesus that show up in the New Testament are actually his stepsiblings—children from Joseph's previous marriage.
- » The *Proto-Gospel of James* had been condemned in the 5th century by St. Jerome, one of early Christianity's greatest scholars in the Latin tradition. Jerome did not like the gospel because it taught that Joseph had had sex with his first wife and thus had children of his own. Jerome believed that such a saintly man would never have had sex with anyone at all, so those siblings of Jesus in the New Testament were actually cousins, not children of Joseph.
- » For this reason, the *Proto-Gospel of James* was controversial among early medieval Christians in the Latin West. But instead of just ignoring it, Latin writers did the next best thing: They plagiarized it and created new gospels about Jesus's birth that built on the *Proto-Gospel of James*, but added new stories.

- » The most popular of these Latin infancy gospels is the *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew*, which exists in almost 200 medieval manuscripts. It was composed in the early 600s, and it reflects the growing popularity of monasticism. In it, the young Virgin Mary lives much like a Benedictine monk: She makes a conscious decision to embrace celibacy, she spends her days in prayer and manual labor, and any money that she earns or food that she makes she gives to the poor.
- » *Pseudo-Matthew* includes a lot of material from the earlier *Proto-Gospel of James*, but it adds a totally new extensive section on the Holy Family's flight to Egypt. Legends about the flight to Egypt can be found in different forms in Christian literature from a variety of places, but the version in the *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew* became the best known to medieval Christians in Europe. This gospel showed how the two-year-old Jesus was already able to use his divine powers to help and protect his parents, to tame wild beasts, and to overcome pagan gods.
- » Sometime between 650 and 800, yet another Christian author took *Pseudo-Matthew* and the *Proto-Gospel of James* and created a much longer infancy gospel in Latin, which eventually came to exist in multiple versions. Some scholars think that the original title may have been *Book of the Nativity of Holy Mary, Mother of God, and of the Infancy of Our Saving Lord Jesus Christ according to the Flesh*. The most well-known version is called the "J Composition."
- » In this later gospel, Joseph is the featured character, and he is accompanied most of the time by one of his sons, Simeon. Other characters frequently address Joseph as "blessed man"—next to Jesus, Joseph really is the hero of this story. Throughout the gospel, however, Joseph reacts as an ordinary person: He at first does not understand everything that happens, but slowly he learns the true meaning of the baby Jesus through other characters.

- » The reader of this gospel may feel that Joseph is somewhat dumb. After all, he has experienced all sorts of revelations that have communicated to him the divine nature of Mary's child. But Joseph functions here as something of a stand-in for the ordinary Christians who might have heard this gospel read. He asks basic, naive questions, which the shepherds, the magi, and other characters answer with good Christian teaching.

History of Joseph the Carpenter

- » In Egypt around the year 600, an anonymous Christian wrote the *History of Joseph the Carpenter* in Coptic, the native language of Egyptians. This remarkable gospel has Jesus himself tell the story of Joseph's life and death.



- » Like the Latin authors that we met, this author borrowed a lot of ideas from the *Proto-Gospel of James*. He also had the text known as the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, which portrays Jesus from age 5 to age 12. In that gospel, Joseph is the parent more involved in the boy Jesus's life, and he is often exasperated with his foster son. In the *History of Joseph the Carpenter*, Joseph remembers some of the childhood deeds of Jesus that are found in the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*.
- » The *History of Joseph the Carpenter* emphasizes the bond of love between Jesus and his presumed human father, Joseph. When the book opens, the adult Jesus is talking with his disciples on the Mount of Olives during the days before his crucifixion. Jesus explains to them that all human beings must die, and when they do, they will be judged as to whether they did good or evil in this life. He then says, "I will tell you the life of my father Joseph, the blessed carpenter." So Jesus tells Joseph's story to teach the disciples about the right way to die.
- » After an incredibly long and healthy life—the book claims that Joseph died at age 111, when Jesus was 19—Joseph responds to his coming death as many people would: He is scared, and he prays to God that his death will not be horrible and that he will not be subject to hell and suffering. As his death draws very near, Joseph delivers a long prayer of repentance, in which he recounts his life, acknowledges his shortcomings, and asks for God's mercy—just as any Christian should.
- » Joseph dies with all of his family around him. They mourn his passing, but Jesus consoles them. Jesus tells them, "As soon as Joseph's soul came forth from the body, all troubles ceased for him. He went

into the eternal kingdom, and he left behind the burden of the body.” He goes on to say that Death serves God and does nothing without God’s command. All people must die—even Jesus himself—but people should trust that God is ultimately in charge.

- » Jesus also makes promises that help to establish a cult of Joseph—that is, Christian practices of devotion to Joseph as a saint. Jesus says that people who give food, drink, and money to the poor and oppressed in Joseph’s name will receive blessings in this life and joy in the next life. People who copy the book about Joseph’s death will receive forgiveness for their sins. In other words, if you’re a scribe and copy the *History of Joseph the Carpenter*, your sins will be forgiven. And if you can’t afford to do these things, you can name one of your sons Joseph—this will protect your family from famine.
- » This is a rather modest beginning to a cult of St. Joseph. In comparison to his wife Mary, Joseph has never been as widely honored. Not until 1479 did the Roman Catholic Church give him a feast day, March 19. Joseph became the patron saint of a good death—which is precisely in the spirit of the *History of Joseph the Carpenter*.

The Revelation of the Magi

.....

- » Some other intriguing characters from the story of Jesus’s birth are the magi, who follow the star and bring precious gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh to the Christ child in the New Testament Gospel of Matthew. The account in Matthew is tantalizingly brief. Magi—that is, wise men or astrologers or magicians or priests—from somewhere in the East show up in Jerusalem and ask where the child who is to be king of the Jews has been born. They have observed his star and have come to worship him.



The Magi visit the baby Jesus.

- » The news of a new king alarms King Herod. He consults with his religious advisers, who tell him that the Messiah is to be born in Bethlehem. Herod sends the wise men off, asking them to report back to him when they have found the child. The star guides them to Jesus in Bethlehem. The magi worship the child, offer him their precious gifts, and then go directly home, having been warned in a dream not to report back to Herod.
- » This story leaves all sorts of questions unanswered. For example, how many wise men were there? Matthew does not say, but most Christians quickly decided there must have been three, corresponding to the



three gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. But mysteries still remain. Who were these magi? Where precisely did they come from? What was the star that they saw? How did they know it had to do with the king of the Jews?

- » One apocryphal text that answers these questions is called the *Revelation of the Magi*. It's part of a chronicle of world history compiled by Syriac-speaking Christian monks in the late 700s. The compilers included in their chronicle an account of the magi's trip to Bethlehem and back, purportedly told by the magi themselves.

- » The most striking feature of the *Revelation of the Magi* is what scholars call its universalism. The star-child Jesus reveals that he is the light that lies behind all religions, and he invites all traditions to worship him. The text plays down distinctive Christian names for the Son of God, such as Jesus and Christ, in favor of more generic names, such as “voice of the Father” or “the ancient light.”
- » This universalism reflects the experience of these Syrian Christians, who did not live in the Byzantine Empire, where Christianity was the official religion. Instead, they lived in Persia, among Zoroastrians, Muslims, and Manicheans, and they brought their Christian mission as far east as China. Mani, the founder of the Manichaean religion, had already stressed that his religion was the epitome of all known religions or their hidden truth. Islam likewise sought to unify all believers in a single worship. These Syrian Christians made the same claims.

LECTURE 5

The Apocrypha and the Cult of Mary

Next to Jesus himself, the Virgin Mary may be the most honored person in the history of Christianity. In the New Testament, however, Mary is not nearly as prominent as her later history might suggest. It is in the early Christian apocrypha that Mary becomes the leader among the saints. These apocryphal texts emphasize Mary's purity and holiness, her special access to divine knowledge, her intercession with God on behalf of ordinary people, and the unusual circumstances of her death.



After Jesus, the Virgin Mary is the most honored Christian figure.

Mary in the New Testament

- » One thing that apocryphal gospels do is fill in gaps in what the New Testament tells us. And when it comes to Mary, there are plenty of such gaps to fill. The earliest Christian author, Paul, once refers to Christ as having been born of a woman, but he does not give that woman's name, nor does he say anything more about her or Jesus's birth.
- » The earliest Gospel, Mark, also has little to say about the mother of Jesus, and what he does say suggests problems. Mark provides no account of Jesus's birth at all. He does say that a small group of women witnessed the crucifixion of Jesus and then found the empty tomb. Among these women are Mary Magdalene and another Mary, who is called the mother of James and Joses. Earlier in the gospel Mark names James and Joses as among Jesus's brothers, so could this be the mother of Jesus? If so, why doesn't Mark call her that?
- » In chapter 3 of Mark, the author tells us how Jesus's mother and brothers come to find and restrain him because they have heard that he is insane. When they show up outside where Jesus is teaching, he asks, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" Gesturing to the people listening, he answers, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother." This anecdote suggests that there was some estrangement between Jesus and his family, or that Mark and his community had ambivalent feelings about the mother and brothers of Jesus.
- » The picture of Mary in the Gospel of John is more complicated. This gospel never mentions her name, calling her simply "the mother of Jesus," and like Mark, John does not tell about Jesus's birth. Near the start of the gospel she appears with her son at a wedding in Cana. When the hosts run low on wine, the mother points this out

to Jesus, and he curtly replies, “Woman, what concern is that to you and me?” Nonetheless, Jesus does turn water into wine, saving the party and providing the first sign of his divine nature.

- » At the end of John, the mother of Jesus appears at the foot of the cross. As he is dying, Jesus sees her with one of his disciples. Jesus tells them to consider themselves mother and son, and the author says that the disciple took the mother into his home. In the Gospel of John, Mary appears at the beginning and the end of Jesus’s ministry—at first as someone whom Jesus rebukes, and finally as someone he clearly loves.
- » Matthew and Luke, however, clearly call Jesus’s mother Mary, and they have stories of Jesus’s birth. These stories differ in their details, but both claim that Mary was betrothed to Joseph, that she was a virgin, and that she gave birth to Jesus in Bethlehem.
- » Of the two, Luke gives Mary the greater role. In Luke, Mary interacts with the angel Gabriel and speaks like a prophet, delivering a major discourse praising God. It is Luke that tells how Jesus and his family visited Jerusalem when Jesus was 12 years old. The author of Luke also wrote the Acts of the Apostles, and there he includes Mary among the early followers of Jesus who gathered in Jerusalem after Jesus ascended into heaven.
- » The New Testament picture of Mary is complicated and raises questions. Some episodes suggest tension between Jesus and Mary or between Jesus and Mary and his brothers. On the other hand, Luke presents Mary as something like a prophet, and he suggests that she has a unique understanding of her son. It’s possible that these New Testament stories recall real problems between Jesus and his family or between early Christians and their own families. Or perhaps the authors of the

gospels differed on how much of a role they believed that Jesus's blood relatives did or should play in the Christian movement.

- » In addition to being ambiguous, Mary's appearances in the New Testament also provoke questions. Who was Mary, really? Why was she chosen to be Jesus's mother? And what happened to her after we last see her around the time of Jesus's ascension? If she was like a prophet and had special knowledge of her son, as Luke suggests, did she ever exercise leadership among the early Christians? These are the questions that ancient apocryphal texts try to answer.

Mary in the *Proto-Gospel of James*

.....

- » The earliest apocryphal text that deals with Mary is the *Proto-Gospel of James*, which is from the middle of the 2nd century. This text fills in the gaps about Mary's background, and it exalts her purity, virginity, and holiness.
- » We learn from the *Proto-Gospel of James* that Mary's own birth was miraculous: Her parents Anna and Joachim were unable to have a child, but God heard their prayers and gave them Mary. Anna and Joachim dedicated Mary to God, and she grew up secluded in the Temple, weaving and praying and receiving food from an angel. Only when she turned 12 did she leave the Temple and come under the protection of Joseph, an elderly widower.
- » The *Proto-Gospel of James* strongly emphasizes Mary's virginity before and after the birth of Jesus. When her pregnancy is discovered, she and Joseph demonstrate their purity by drinking a special potion. Later, after Jesus's birth, when Salome doubts that Mary is a virgin and examines her to be certain, Salome's hand burns and begins to fall off—until she repents and is healed.

- » This strong focus on Mary's virginity probably reflects three things: First, the author is defending Mary against non-Christians who claimed that Jesus was not born of a virgin, but that he was the product of some illicit sexual liaison. Second, it promotes Mary as a model for Christian virgins. Third, it glorifies Mary as exceptionally pure and sacred.
- » The *Proto-Gospel of James* was hugely popular, and its presentation of Mary's birth and childhood became authoritative. Later apocryphal works sometimes changed a few details, but the basics of Mary's story endured as known facts for Christians all over the world.

Mary in Later Apocryphal Literature

- » Scholars are not quite sure when Mary next appears in apocryphal literature. That's because there are several Christian works from the 2nd and 3rd centuries that feature a woman named Mary among Christ's closest disciples. The question is, which Mary is this?
- » For example, in the apocryphal *Gospel of Thomas*, Peter objects to the presence of Mary among the disciples. He wants Jesus to send her away because, as he says, "females are not worthy of life." But Jesus replies that he will guide Mary to make her male, because females who make themselves male will enter the kingdom of heaven. In the view of this gospel and many other ancient sources, ideal humanity is male, and Jesus says that even women can aspire to achieve a state of maleness.
- » In the apocryphal *Gospel of Mary*, Mary tells the male disciples about special revelations that she has received from Christ. Once again Peter challenges Mary, and Andrew joins him in disputing whether

Jesus would give special insights to a woman. The disciple Levi, however, defends Mary and says that Jesus loved her more than the male disciples.

- » Who is this Mary? Nearly all scholars believe that she's Mary Magdalene, a disciple of Jesus who appears in all the Gospels and who appears prominently in stories of Jesus's resurrection. In the New Testament Gospels, it's Mary Magdalene who usually discovers that Jesus's tomb is empty on Easter morning.
- » Nevertheless, the historian Stephen Shoemaker, the world's leading scholar of the Virgin Mary in ancient Christianity, points out that these and other texts do not actually say that this Mary is Mary Magdalene. Perhaps she's actually Mary of Nazareth, the mother of Jesus.



Mary is regarded as one of Jesus's closest and most loved disciples.

Mary in Late Antiquity

- » A large number of stories, hymns, and sermons from late antiquity and the early Middle Ages describe the last days of Mary's life. They tell how Mary's soul and body were specially and miraculously transported to paradise, so that her body was not left in the ground to suffer corruption and decay.
- » These numerous texts differ in many respects, but they share the fundamental conviction that, as the pure vessel that had once contained the Son of God, Mary's body could not suffer the same death and decay that any ordinary body would. Moreover, as God's Mother, Mary enjoys a special relationship with the Lord, one that gives her knowledge of mysteries beyond that of any other person, and enables her to intercede on behalf of human beings with her divine son.
- » In the *Book of Mary's Repose*, an apocryphal text from the 3rd century, we find key elements of how Christians saw Mary in late antiquity: She has special esoteric knowledge of mysteries, which Christ has shared with her; her soul and body are pure and spotless; she therefore does not die as other people do; instead, she lies down and sleeps at God's command, and her soul and body are taken to paradise; and sinful human beings can ask her to intercede with Christ on their behalf.
- » Some of these elements appear also in the *Six Books Dormition Apocryphon* from the 4th century. As in the *Book of Mary's Repose*, Christ, Michael, and the other angels take Mary's soul and body to paradise, so that she does not decay in her tomb. In contrast to the *Book of Mary's Repose*, however, the *Six Books Dormition Apocryphon* shows clearly that some Christians were already venerating Mary with scheduled festival days.

- » In the 420s, Nestorius, the bishop of Constantinople, denied that Mary should be called the mother of God. God can't be born, he argued; God has no mother. Instead, Mary gave birth to the human Jesus, with whom the Son of God united. Other bishops had problems with Nestorius's teachings for theological reasons, and many ordinary Christians rebelled against his ideas as well. At a major church council at Ephesus in 431, Nestorius was condemned, and Mary was declared the mother of God.
- » Devotion to Mary flourished even more in the following decades and centuries. In 1950, Pope Pius XII defined as official Catholic doctrine the assumption of the Virgin's body and soul into heavenly glory—putting the full authority of the Church behind an idea first found in century apocryphal texts from the 3rd and 4th centuries.

LECTURE 6

Lost Gospels and Fragments

Early Christians read and discussed far more gospels than the four that ended up in the New Testament. Some of these survive in manuscript fragments and in short quotations by early Christian authors. Others are known only by their titles; the texts themselves have been completely lost. All of these sources provide fascinating and frustrating glimpses into the diversity of ancient Christianity.



Some gospels are lost.

Gospel Fragments

.....

- » Two of the oldest unknown gospels survive only fragmentarily on scraps of papyrus. Almost all these scraps come from Egypt, the very dry climate of which makes it possible for papyrus to last for centuries. A majority of gospel fragments come from Oxyrhynchus, which was a thriving town in Egypt during the first centuries A.D.
- » From around 1900 to the 1930s, teams of archaeologists recovered large amounts of papyri from trash heaps outside the ancient city. These scraps included all sorts of things, ranging from tax receipts and personal letters to bits of Homer and Plato. Christian texts were among them.
- » Papyrus Oxyrhynchus 840, for example, measures about 3 by 3½ inches and was probably copied in the 4th century. In the surviving text, Jesus walks into the Temple in Jerusalem and is confronted by a man named Levi. Levi asks how Jesus can enter the Temple without having been ritually washed. In response, Jesus disparages washing in water, which only cleanses the skin, and which even prostitutes do. The inside of a person remains full of evils. Jesus says, “My disciples and I, who you say have not bathed, have been dipped in waters of eternal life, which come from...” And then the text breaks off.
- » This short dialogue between Jesus and a Jewish leader over ritual purity sounds like similar debates in the New Testament Gospels, but it does not match any of them. Still, it may suggest that Christians continued to have debates with Jews over practices like ritual bathing in the centuries after Jesus’s death. One scholar has proposed that this gospel reflects a controversy among Christians over whether baptism and similar rituals are necessary. There’s no way to be sure which interpretation is correct, but you can see how even such a brief

fragment might give us access to debates among early Christians that we would not otherwise know about.

- » Papyrus Egerton 2 contains about twice as much text as Papyrus Oxyrhynchus 840, and it's very important because it probably dates to around A.D. 200. That makes it one of the earliest surviving manuscripts of any Christian text, whether inside or outside the New Testament.
- » Papyrus Egerton 2 contains four stories, three of which have parallels in the New Testament gospels. The one story in Papyrus Egerton 2 that does not appear in the New Testament gospels is very fragmentary, so we can't make out precisely what it says. But it involves some sort of miracle that Jesus performs on the bank of the Jordan River. The text says that Jesus stretched out his right hand and filled it with something, probably seed, and then sowed it, perhaps in the water. The last line says that it brought forth fruit.



- » Fragmentary gospels like these raise fascinating, but perhaps unanswerable questions. One thing we can say for sure, however, is that there were a lot more gospels and stories about Jesus around in the first few centuries than anyone knew before such papyri were discovered.

Lost Gospels

.....

- » Some early Christian authors refer to titles of gospels that we no longer have. In some cases, they even tell us who was reading them and why. But they provide us with only very small quotations from such gospels, which make it very difficult for us to say much about them.
- » Several Christian authors of the 2nd through 5th centuries mention gospels that have names that sound Jewish—the *Gospel of the Nazareans*, the *Gospel of the Hebrews*, and a Hebrew version of the Gospel of Matthew dated earlier than the one we have in Greek. Nearly all modern scholars reject the possibility that the Gospel of Matthew was originally written in Hebrew, but they all agree that there were gospels that came from early Christian groups who had closer ties to Judaism and Jewish traditions than did other Christians. They call these Jewish-Christian gospels.
- » In the 2nd century, Clement of Alexandria quotes a lost gospel referred to as the *Gospel according to the Egyptians* in the context of Christian debates about sex and marriage. It seems that some Christians demanded celibacy of everyone—meaning that no Christian should get married. In support of their position, they cited sayings of Jesus found in the *Gospel according to the Egyptians*.
- » Nearly all of Clement's quotations seem to come from a single passage of the *Gospel according to the Egyptians*, a passage in which Jesus has

a discussion with a female disciple named Salome. From these brief quotations, scholars have reconstructed what they think was at least part of the dialogue between Jesus and Salome in this lost gospel:

Jesus: “I have come to destroy the works of the female.”

Salome: “How long will people continue to die?”

Jesus: “For as long as women give birth to children.”

Salome: “Then I have done well not to give birth.”

Jesus: “Eat every plant, but the one that has bitterness do not eat.”

Salome: “When will this become known?”

Jesus: “When you trample upon the garment of shame, and when the two become one and when the male with the female is neither male nor female.”

- » Without a copy of the *Gospel according to the Egyptians*, modern scholars lack any context in which to understand what this dialogue may have meant in that text. But we can see how Clement and his opponents argued about it.
- » According to Clement, Christian advocates of celibacy interpreted this passage as a call to give up sexual activity and procreation to bring in the kingdom of God. Jesus came to bring an end to “the works of the female,” that is, sex and procreation. People will keep dying as long as new children are born, so Christians should contribute to the end of death by not reproducing more children. When Christians



Christians were urged to give up sexual desire.

give up the shame of sexual desire and activity, then they will have moved beyond the distinction between male and female.

- » Clement, on the other hand, took a less literal approach to this passage. He says that “the works of the female” that Jesus came to destroy are all sorts of desire—not just sexual desire, but also love of money and gluttony—as it was believed that women had more desire for all such pleasures than men did. According to Clement, this passage instructs Christians to avoid shameful, excessive desires for sex, money, and food, not to give them up entirely. And when Jesus says that people will continue to die as long as women give birth to children, he’s just making an observation: All people die, so as long as there are people, they will die.



Statue of the apostle Mark

The Secret Gospel of Mark

- » The *Secret Gospel of Mark* has become the center of a furious controversy among scholars of early Christianity. Was there really a *Secret Gospel of Mark*? Or is it all a case of forgery, whether ancient or modern? Could it be an elaborate hoax to embarrass scholars of early Christianity, or to argue for tolerance of homosexuality among Christians?
- » The alleged secret version of Mark was brought to the attention of modern scholars by Morton Smith, a brilliant but cantankerous professor of ancient history at Columbia University. Smith died in



1991. According to Smith, in the late 1950s he made a remarkable discovery in the library of the Mar Saba Monastery near Jerusalem: a fragment of a letter from Clement of Alexandria to someone named Theodore. The manuscript fragment probably dated to the 18th century. Smith published the fragment and his interpretation of it in the 1970s.

- » In the fragmentary letter, Clement condemns a group of Christians named the Carpocratians, who advocated sexual freedom among Christians. People are no longer required to have sex only within marriage, the Carpocratians believed. Jesus abolished private

property, which means that no one belongs to anyone else and people can have sex with whomever they want. We know about the Carpocratians only from Clement, so we can't be sure that they really believed all this.

- » Clement says that the Carpocratians support their teachings by referring to a special secret version of the Gospel of Mark. Clement tells Theodore that this secret edition of Mark does in fact exist. Mark, Clement says, published two versions of his gospel. The one that everyone knows is meant for beginners and less advanced Christians. But Mark wrote a second version, containing more esoteric teachings of Jesus. This other version is meant for advanced Christians, who have been initiated into the secret mysteries of Christ and who are seeking higher knowledge of God. The church in Alexandria closely guards this secret gospel and reveals it only to those who are worthy.
- » According to Clement, the Carpocratians somehow got hold of the *Secret Gospel of Mark*. They interpret its secret teachings falsely, in support of their views, and they have even added some words to it. Clement is writing to Theodore to set the record straight about what's really in the secret gospel and what's not.
- » Clement quotes one substantial passage from *Secret Mark* in addition to one very short passage. According to Clement, the *Secret Gospel of Mark* modifies what we know as chapter 10 of the Gospel of Mark by adding the following:

And they come into Bethany, and a certain woman, whose brother had died, was there. And, coming, she prostrated herself before Jesus and says to him, "Son of David, have mercy on me." But the disciples rebuked her. And Jesus,

being angered, went off with her into the garden where the tomb was, and straightaway a great cry was heard from the tomb. And going near Jesus rolled away the stone from the door of the tomb. And straightaway, going in where the youth was, he stretched forth his hand and raised him, seizing his hand. But the youth, looking upon him, loved him, and began to beseech him that he might be with him. And going out of the tomb they came into the house of the youth, for he was rich. And after six days Jesus told him what to do, and in the evening the youth comes to him, wearing a linen cloth over his naked body. And he remained with him that night, for Jesus taught him the mystery of the kingdom of God. And thence, arising, he returned to the other side of the Jordan.

- » Some scholars have detected homoerotic themes in this passage. The youth loves Jesus at first sight, and he spends an entire night alone with Jesus, wearing only a linen cloth. And indeed, it seems that this may be what attracted the Carpocratians to this secret gospel. Other historians, however, claim that nakedness and all-night instruction are signs simply of Christian baptism, which in antiquity took place in an overnight vigil and required that candidates fully undress for immersion in water. Either way, the text clearly indicates that Clement of Alexandria considered the *Secret Gospel of Mark* to be a legitimate gospel that came from the author of New Testament Mark.
- » As soon as Smith began to make the text of Clement's letter to Theodore known, many scholars challenged the authenticity and meaning of the document. The controversy continues to the present day. Historians who have discussed the text may be divided into two large groups, with some subdivisions among them:

- ❏ Some scholars accept that Clement really did write to Theodore and that there really was a *Secret Gospel of Mark*, although they disagree about who wrote the secret gospel and how it relates to New Testament Mark.
- ❏ Other scholars reject Clement's letter to Theodore as a forgery. These scholars disagree, however, about when the forgery was made. Some consider it an ancient forgery. Other scholars think that the forgery was created in the 18th century, the approximate date of the manuscript that Smith found. Still others think that Smith himself forged the letter to promote himself as a great scholar, to play a prank on other historians, or to promote homosexuality.

» Unfortunately, the manuscript page that Smith claimed to have found has been lost. Until contemporary scholars can examine the manuscript for themselves, they probably will never reach a consensus on whether Clement really did write the letter to Theodore and thus whether there really was a *Secret Gospel of Mark*.

LECTURE 7

Sayings of Jesus from the *Gospel of Thomas*

The *Gospel of Thomas* is by far the most famous apocryphal gospel. A relatively recent discovery, Thomas is a precious relic from an era in which early Christians were still sorting out who Jesus was and what his life and teachings meant. While there are some similarities between the *Gospel of Thomas* and the canonical Gospels, *Thomas's* portrayal of Jesus and the path to salvation is different from anything presented in the New Testament.



Statue of the apostle Thomas

Discovering the *Gospel of Thomas*

- » Until the 20th century, no copy of the *Gospel of Thomas* was known to have survived. The earliest known reference to the gospel comes in an early Christian work entitled *Refutation of All Heresies*, a Greek-language work of unknown authorship composed in the 220s. The Christian scholar Origen, working around the same time or shortly thereafter, also mentioned the *Gospel of Thomas*. References to *Thomas* multiplied from the 300s onward.
- » In 1945, a group of 13 ancient Christian books were discovered near Nag Hammadi, Egypt. Nearly 50 treatises appear in these books, all of them written in the Coptic language and most likely copied in the late 4th or early 5th century. Among them is a text titled the *Gospel of Thomas*.
- » Similarities between the discovered text and the *Refutation* confirmed for most historians that the text is a Coptic translation of the Greek *Gospel of Thomas* circulated in the early 200s. The text also matched three fragmentary Greek manuscripts discovered around 1900 in Oxyrhynchus, Egypt. The discovery of the full Coptic text at Nag Hammadi enabled scholars to identify additional quotations of Jesus in the works of Origen as taken from the *Gospel of Thomas*.



- » As a result of these findings, we now have fragments and quotations from the *Gospel of Thomas* in Greek and an ancient translation of the entire gospel in Coptic. We also know that the gospel was written sometime before the year 200, although historians disagree about how much earlier than 200 the gospel was composed.

Relationship to the Canonical Gospels

- » There is debate as to whether the author of *Thomas* used the four Gospels of the New Testament in writing his own. A minority of scholars argues that at least a first version of *Thomas* originated in the 1st century and did not make use of the New Testament Gospels. Instead, the author drew upon oral traditions of Jesus's sayings or upon written sources that we now lack. More scholars think that the author did use the canonical Gospels and probably wrote sometime in the early 100s.
- » If the author of *Thomas* did not use the New Testament Gospels, then his gospel would provide us with independent access to oral traditions of Jesus's teachings, possibly even sayings that go back to Jesus himself. If he did use Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, then obviously *Thomas* does not provide that kind of information, and we can understand its theology by comparing it to the earlier texts that it used.
- » Most scholars agree that the text we now have of *Thomas* in Coptic does show knowledge of the canonical Gospels. But it also contains traditions that could come from oral traditions and earlier sources we don't have, and the author doubtless added new material that he composed. In this sense *Thomas* is not much different from, say, the Gospel of Luke.

- » If *Thomas* is like the New Testament Gospels in the way it was composed, it's very different from them in the kind of book it is. Unlike Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, *Thomas* does not present a narrative of Jesus's ministry and death. Instead, it consists only of sayings of Jesus, usually introduced merely with the words "Jesus said." In the vocabulary of the gospel, it gives us "the living Jesus."
- » For *Thomas*, other gospels miss the point when they dwell on Jesus's life, his activities, and his death. In Jesus's case, the New Testament Gospels assume that you learn truth and virtue by seeing, above all, how Jesus died.
- » The *Gospel of Thomas*, however, is modeled on wisdom books, which collect the sayings of a wise person. Wisdom books suggest that you learn truth and virtue from what an ideal man taught. In the *Gospel of Thomas*, Jesus brings salvation by teaching and revealing divine truth, not by dying and rising again.

Salvation in the *Gospel of Thomas*

.....

- » In the *Gospel of Thomas*, salvation comes to those who learn from Jesus's sayings the truth about themselves. "When you come to know yourselves," Jesus says, "then you will be known, and you will understand that that you are children of the living Father." If people do not come to know themselves, then they remain mired in spiritual poverty.
- » Your true self, *Thomas* teaches, does not belong to this world of change and materiality. Instead, it originated in a realm of permanence and intellect. And it will return to that realm—if you come to know your true self. Our problem, then, is not sin, but ignorance: We mistakenly

think that the present cosmos of bodies and constant change is our true home, and we mistakenly think that our embodied selves are our true selves.

- » In the New Testament Gospels, Jesus preaches that the kingdom of God is coming near. You can see its impending arrival in his own ministry, but it still lies in the future. In *Thomas*, Jesus says that the kingdom is already here, and people just don't see it.
- » The way the *Gospel of Thomas* phrases all this makes clear that the author is deliberately highlighting the difference between what he's teaching and what you find in gospels like those in the New Testament. He has Jesus explicitly contrast what he's saying with what the reader might have heard elsewhere. But we should not carry this difference too far. Even in the New Testament Gospels we sometimes see a tendency to stress how near the kingdom of God is.
- » Rather than completely opposing the apocalyptic eschatology that we find in the New Testament Gospels, the *Gospel of Thomas* draws upon and develops trends that we see in those Gospels—tendencies to see the kingdom as already present in the proclamation of Jesus and to emphasize the moment of belief or awakening as the crucial moment of salvation.
- » The *Gospel of Thomas* shows little interest in the normal aspects of living in this material world. “Be passersby,” Jesus tells his followers. “Abstain from the world.” The gospel rejects sex and family, it condemns business activities aimed at getting rich, and it dismisses as irrelevant such traditional religious practices as prayer, almsgiving, and fasting.

LECTURE 8

Jesus's Statements beyond the Gospels

Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were not the only sources that ancient Christians had for the teachings of Jesus. There were also *agrapha* (“unwritten things”), sayings attributed to Jesus that are not found in the New Testament Gospels. These sayings are an important piece of the puzzle that is the apocryphal Jesus.



Jesus with his disciples

Understanding Agrapha

- » The category of agrapha is not entirely a clear one. For a long time, scholars said that agrapha included all the sayings of Jesus that do not appear in the canonical Gospels. This included any sayings of Jesus in the apocryphal gospels. But in 1945, the Nag Hammadi codices were discovered in Egypt, and the number of agrapha skyrocketed.
- » As a result, most scholars today use the term “agrapha” to refer to sayings of Jesus that are not recorded in any gospel, whether in the New Testament or outside of it. So the many sayings attributed to Jesus in the *Gospel of Thomas*, for example, are not agrapha. Moreover, scholars typically restrict the term to sayings that Jesus would have spoken during his earthly ministry, not things that Jesus said in appearances or revelations to people after his resurrection. As we’ll see, however, that can be hard to track.
- » Agrapha are found in three places: books of the New Testament other than the Gospels, such as Acts and the letters of Paul; the works of other early Christian authors, such as the writings of Origen; and alternative manuscripts of the New Testament Gospels.

Agrapha in Alternative Manuscripts

- » As you may know, we have no original copies of any New Testament work. Instead, we have thousands of manuscripts, mostly dating to the medieval period. In some of the more ancient manuscripts of the Gospels, we find sayings of Jesus that appear in only one manuscript, or in only a few, that surely were not part of the original Gospel. Instead, some scribe knew the saying and felt the need to add it to the text.

- » For example, only one manuscript of the Gospel of Luke contains the following anecdote in chapter 6:

On the same day, when he [Jesus] saw a certain man working on the Sabbath, he said to him, “O man, if you know what you are doing, you are blessed; but if you do not know, you are cursed, and a transgressor of the Law.”

- » This sentence comes from a manuscript known as Codex Bezae, which comes from the 5th or 6th century and is currently stored at the University of Cambridge in England. This codex preserves mostly the Gospels and Acts, and it’s famous for having many differences from and expansions on most other manuscripts. Its text of Luke and Acts is so distinctive that it has its own name: the Western Text.
- » This agraphon actually seems to come from a time when Christians were debating whether and how to observe the Sabbath, either the traditional Jewish Sabbath on Saturday or the new Christian Sabbath on Sunday. What the saying is concerned about is not whether a person works or not on the Sabbath, but whether the person understands what he or she is doing.
- » In the Gospel of Luke and other Gospels, certain sayings of Jesus imply that people can be flexible in how they observe the Sabbath. The agraphon in Codex Bezae takes this idea a step further, implying that people can even work on the Sabbath, but they must be thoughtful in making that choice and recognize the true meaning of the Sabbath. The saying sounds like it could come from Jesus, but it reflects the ideas of a later era.

Agrapha in the New Testament

- » In the Acts of the Apostles, Paul quotes Jesus as saying, “It is more blessed to give than to receive.” Notably, however, this saying does not appear in any of the Gospels—including Luke, which the author of Acts also wrote.
- » Some scholars suggest that this statement is meant only to summarize the words of Jesus on the topic of charity that can be found in the Gospel of Luke. Other historians argue that contrasting giving and receiving was common in the ancient world; authors ranging from Thucydides to Plutarch to Seneca make such a comparison, almost always saying that a wise person will give and lend to others rather than receive from them and be in their debt.
- » Another direct quotation of Jesus by Paul illustrates a different type of source for sayings of Jesus. In 2 Corinthians, Paul says that he suffered from what he calls a “thorn in the flesh,” some physical or psychological torment that he attributes to Satan. Paul says that he prayed to the Lord three times, asking for relief from this pain, but Jesus said to him, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”
- » This is something Jesus said to Paul in some kind of vision or revelation. Even so, scholars traditionally would not include it among the agrapha, because it’s not a saying that purports to come from Jesus during his earthly ministry. Instead, it is a saying that was revealed to a Christian after Jesus’s resurrection.
- » Nonetheless, we have to be open to the possibility that some sayings of Jesus that are transmitted as coming from him during his ministry may have originated in just this way. After Paul shared this with the



Some gospels say working on the Sabbath is a choice that must be made after much thought.

Christians in Corinth in his letter or perhaps with other Christians orally, one or more Christians might have repeated it as something Jesus said to Paul. Subsequent Christians might then have repeated the saying simply as something Jesus said—“My power is made perfect in weakness”—without any reference to Paul. The saying might then have circulated as a saying of Jesus that he could have said during his earthly ministry.

- » In the case of this particular saying, we have no evidence that this happened. But it’s completely possible that some of the sayings attributed to Jesus in the Gospels were originally revealed to Christians just as Paul believed that the resurrected Jesus had revealed this saying to him.

Agrapha in Early Christian Literature

.....

- » The most famous agraphon from early Christian literature is a command: “Be wise money changers!” The earliest Christian author to quote this command as a saying of Jesus is Origen of Alexandria,

who lived in the first half of the 3rd century. Altogether, however, there are approximately 70 citations or allusions to this saying in ancient Christian literature.

- » Changing money was a necessary job in the ancient world, and doing it well required experience and skill—above all, the ability to tell whether a coin was worth what it was supposed to be. There would have been no shame in a Christian trying to be a wise money changer, as Jesus was said to have commanded.
- » Unlike other agrapha we have seen, the form of this saying is pretty much the same wherever it appears. What differs is how early Christian authors understood the saying and what they applied it to. Surely Jesus was not telling his followers literally to become money changers, but instead to exhibit the same discernment that a wise money changer has, to be able to tell the difference between what's true and false, good and bad.
- » Although Origen is the earliest author to attribute the saying to Jesus, he is not the earliest to quote it at all. Probably around the year 200, Clement of Alexandria, another Christian intellectual, says that it's in the Bible: "Scripture exhorts us," Clement says, "'Be wise money changers,' rejecting some things, but retaining what's good." Clement may say this saying is in the Bible, but it's not, as far as we know.
- » According to Clement, the saying tells educated Christians to engage in dialectical study of ethics and metaphysics in their attempt to gain knowledge of God. They should reject scientific or philosophical concepts that are worthless or unethical, and embrace those that are good. As Christians are educated, they act like wise money

changers if they carefully discern what's useful to their education and virtue and what's not.

- » Clement expands this use of the saying to the problem of heresies or competing doctrines within Christianity. Disagreements among Christians, Clement says, give no reason not to become a Christian and listen to a true Christian leader. The existence of heresies tests who the orthodox teachers are—such teachers are the approved money changers because they are shown to know true doctrine and to avoid what's false.
- » In the 4th century, the saying became popular among monastic leaders. According to the monastic author Cassian, as the monk goes about his day in silence, all sorts of thoughts enter into his mind. Some of these thoughts are clearly good ones, leading the monk to act virtuously and to contemplate God. But some of these thoughts come from demons, leading the monk to act wickedly and to turn away from contemplation and prayer. We must analyze the thoughts that occur to us, Cassian tells his fellow monks. “We must, as the Lord’s command bids us, become skillful money changers.”
- » Perhaps the most interesting application of the saying is found in Origen in the 3rd century. Origen considers the fact that there are multiple gospels, not just the four in the New Testament. What’s needed, Origen says, is a great man who has the gift of the Holy Spirit and who can act as the skillful money, discerning which writings are true and orthodox and which are false and heretical, which scriptures can be trusted and which must be rejected.

LECTURE 9

Conversations with the Living Jesus

By their own admission, the authors of the New Testament Gospels did not include in their books everything that Jesus said to his followers. Some purported conversations between Jesus and his disciples are collected in what are called dialogue gospels, apocryphal works that present Jesus and one or more of his disciples engaged in a lengthy give-and-take. In this lecture, you will examine three dialogue gospels that feature conversations between Jesus and the disciples before his death.



Jesus with his followers

The Book of Thomas the Contender

Writing to the Perfect

- » The *Gospel of Thomas*—unlike the gospels in the New Testament—provides no narrative of Jesus’s life and ministry, nor does it tell us about his death and resurrection. Instead, it provides simply a set of 114 sayings of Jesus, many of them introduced only with the words “Jesus said.” The author admits that the sayings that he reports are “obscure” or “hidden,” but he promises that the person who discovers the meaning of the sayings will find salvation. Jesus himself encourages the reader or hearer to make every effort to find the meaning of what he teaches:

Let those who seek not stop seeking until they find.
And when they find, they will be disturbed; and when
they are disturbed, they will be amazed, and they will
reign over the entirety.

- » This saying not only encourages people to seek out what Jesus means, but it implicitly promises that, if you seek long enough, you will find. What you find may be disturbing at first, but then, after further reflection, you’ll be amazed, and you’ll “reign over the entirety”—that is, you’ll transcend this world and enjoy the spiritual destiny that has been prepared for you.
- » But what will you find? And why is it disturbing? A partial answer comes in a work entitled the *Book of Thomas the Contender Writing to the Perfect*, referred to as the *Book of Thomas* for short. Like the *Gospel of Thomas*, a Coptic translation of the *Book of Thomas* was discovered at Nag Hammadi in Egypt. Although the Coptic manuscript probably dates to the late 4th or early 5th century, the *Book of Thomas*

was originally written in Greek, probably in the late 2nd century. It's definitely intended to be a supplement to the *Gospel of Thomas*.

- » The *Gospel of Thomas* opens with this statement: “These are the obscure sayings that the living Jesus uttered and which Didymus Judas Thomas wrote down.” The *Book of Thomas* echoes this line in its opening: “The obscure sayings that the Savior uttered to Jude Thomas and which I, Matthaïas, also wrote down.” Matthaïas goes on to say that he used to travel around with Thomas and Jesus and listen to what they would say to one another. It seems that Jesus had special private conversations with Thomas. So the gospel records a dialogue between Thomas and Jesus, who is called simply “the Savior.”
- » In this dialogue, Jesus clarifies some of the important ideas of the *Gospel of Thomas*. For example, it's in the *Book of Thomas* that we first learn why Thomas is called Jesus's twin or double. The name “Thomas” means “twin” or “double” in Aramaic. Thomas is Jesus's double, Jesus explains, because he illustrates that to know oneself is to know Jesus as well. Human beings share in or replicate the divine nature, so when you know your true self as divine, you know God and everything that is.



Sculpture of the Virgin Mary holding the baby Jesus

- » This clarity inspires Thomas to ask Jesus to explain all the other obscure things that he has taught. Thomas is concerned both because he needs to gain true knowledge to be saved and because it's his task to bring the message of Jesus to others. How can he teach others about the Savior if he himself finds the Savior's teachings obscure?
- » According to Jesus, the reason people find his sayings obscure is revealed in those teachings themselves—namely, that there is a vast difference between the world in which we find ourselves and the realm that's truly real and to which we really belong. The Savior's explanations to Thomas develop a series of binary contrasts: the flesh versus the spirit, the visible versus the invisible, the fire of carnal lust versus the light of true knowledge, the fool versus the wise person, the disbelievers versus the believers. Jesus's sayings are obscure because they have to do with the realm of spirit, light, and the invisible, but human beings prefer the realm of flesh, fire, and the visible. Through his sayings, people can learn to turn away from the flesh and its fire of lust and toward the spirit and the light of knowledge.
- » The *Book of Thomas* urges Christians to separate themselves from the body and its desires—and to separate themselves from the foolish unbelievers. Jesus condemns, in the strongest possible terms, sexual desire, which makes people stupid and bestial, unable to recognize the truth of the spiritual realm. Foolish people who live for the flesh will suffer severe punishment after death. They will be cast into an abyss, where they will be flogged with whips of fire. Because they enslaved themselves to the fire of lust, they will suffer forever in the fire of hell.
- » Jesus says that the wise people will stay away from the foolish and the unbelievers. At one point, Thomas asks, "What shall we say to blind persons? Which teaching shall we offer to wretched mortals?"



Jesus's reply is surprising. "Truly," the Savior says, "do not consider these people to be human beings; count them as domestic animals—for just as animals devour one another, so also human beings of this kind devour one another."

- » The *Book of Thomas* seems to come from a group of Christians who have grown bitter because other people, whether Christians or not, have rejected the message of salvation through knowledge that they have learned through the *Gospel of Thomas*. Other people scoff at and ridicule their teachings, and the world has



rejected them. So they have Jesus tell them to turn away from their opponents, leave behind what he calls “labor and mockery,” and persevere in devotion to the light of knowledge.

The *Dialogue of the Savior*

- » The spirit of the *Gospel of Thomas* is somewhat better continued in another dialogue gospel, the *Dialogue of the Savior*. This fragmentary text was, like the *Book of Thomas*, discovered at Nag Hammadi in Coptic, but it too was originally composed in Greek, probably during the late 100s.

- » The connections between the *Dialogue of the Savior* and the *Gospel of Thomas* are subtler than those between the *Book of Thomas* and the *Gospel of Thomas*, but they're there if you look for them. First, although in the *Dialogue* Jesus seems to be speaking with all the disciples, only three are named—Judas, Matthew, and Mary—and these three also receive a special vision that the other disciples do not. These three disciples play prominent roles in the *Gospel of Thomas*, suggesting some relationship between the *Gospel of Thomas* and the *Dialogue*.
- » In addition, the *Dialogue* contains numerous echoes of sayings in the *Gospel of Thomas*. Like the Jesus of *Thomas*, Jesus in the *Dialogue* urges people to stand at rest, to make the inside like the outside, to become one with oneself and God, and above all, to know oneself. Like *Thomas*, the *Dialogue* encourages Christians to seek and find truth.
- » Like the *Book of Thomas*, the *Dialogue of the Savior* builds upon the sayings of the *Gospel of Thomas*. But the *Book of Thomas* reduced the ambiguity and complexity of the gospel to a simple message: Abandon the world of the flesh and sexual desire, and turn to the light of spiritual knowledge. The *Dialogue*, however, retains the obscurity and mystical tone of the gospel, even as it encourages people to look to the spiritual rather than the physical.

The Gospel of the Savior

.....

- » In saying 82 of the *Gospel of Thomas*, Jesus says, “Whoever is near me is near fire, and whoever is far from me is far from the kingdom.” In a recently published dialogue gospel, we find Jesus saying pretty much the same thing: “Whoever is near me is near the fire. Whoever is far from me is far from life.” It seems likely that the author of this new gospel used the *Gospel of Thomas*, but he used several other gospels as well, especially Matthew and John.

- » This new gospel is very fragmentary. It survives in two papyrus manuscripts found in Berlin and Strasbourg. We don't have the beginning or end of the text, so we don't know what the title was, but scholars have called it the *Gospel of the Savior*. This is because Jesus is consistently called, not Jesus, but “the Savior”—just as he is in the *Book of Thomas* and the *Dialogue of the Savior*. The two manuscripts are both in Coptic. The one in Berlin may date to the late 7th century or the 8th century, while the Strasbourg manuscript may be about 200 years older.
- » We're not sure when and where the Coptic manuscripts were discovered. The text was first published and made available to scholars in 1999, but the original edition had some mistakes, which other scholars have corrected.
- » Historians are of two minds about this strange document. The original editors and most other scholars believe that, even though this gospel appears in Coptic manuscripts from late antiquity, as do the *Book of Thomas* and the *Dialogue of the Savior*, it was written originally in Greek in the 2nd or 3rd century. This would account for the author's willingness to use the *Gospel of Thomas*, which was later condemned as heretical. In addition, a speech by Jesus to his cross reminds some readers of the 2nd-century *Gospel of Peter*, in which the cross walks and talks.
- » On the other hand, some scholars have more recently proposed that the *Gospel of the Savior* was written in Coptic during the late 5th century or even the 6th century. They see many parallels with Coptic literature of this later period, and they point to passages that may reflect debates over the nature of Christ that took place during the 400s. For now, at least, we will need to leave this debate unresolved.



- » Whenever this dialogue gospel was composed, we can see in it the same basic question that we saw in the *Book of Thomas* and the *Dialogue of the Savior*. What did Jesus and his disciples talk about that's not reported in the well-known gospels? And we can see the same concern to reassure Christians who may be wondering what the future holds and when they will have true salvation.

- » As in the *Book of Thomas* and the *Dialogue of the Savior*, Jesus encourages the disciples to persevere until their final reward: "Do not sleep and do not slumber until you clothe yourselves with the garment of the kingdom, which I have bought with the blood of grapes!" And here too the Savior tells the disciples that the path to salvation is knowledge of themselves: "Know yourselves, so that you might profit me, and I will rejoice over your work!"

LECTURE 10

The *Gospel of Judas*'s Gnostic Vision

The newest apocryphal gospel to appear is the *Gospel of Judas*. The gospel is about Judas Iscariot—the disciple who, according to the New Testament Gospels, had betrayed Jesus—although it does not claim to have come from Judas himself. The *Gospel of Judas* addresses Judas's knowledge of what Jesus really means, his difference from the other disciples, and his ultimate role in the future reorganization of the cosmos.



Fresco of Judas and Jesus

Discovery and Publication

- » The *Gospel of Judas* was published in 2006, but historians of Christianity had long known that the existence of such a gospel was possible. Around the year 180, Irenaeus, the bishop of Lyons, had briefly mentioned a gospel with this title, claiming that it had been fabricated by a group of Christians called the Gnostics.
- » The Coptic codex that contains the *Gospel of Judas* seems to have been discovered with three other books in the late 1970s near Al-Minya, Egypt. The other three books found contain a Greek mathematical text, a copy of the biblical book Exodus in Greek, and a copy of the letters of St. Paul in Coptic. The codex containing *Judas* was probably copied in the early 300s, but the original Greek text was composed in the middle of the 100s.
- » Even though the Coptic manuscript was found in the late 1970s, scholars did not publish the *Gospel of Judas* until 2006. Instead, a series of middlemen and antiquities dealers prevented scientific conservation and study of the text as they tried to get lots of money for it. Still, the text was worth the wait.

Contents of the Gospel

- » Unlike the gospels in the New Testament, the *Gospel of Judas* does not tell us much about Jesus's life and ministry. There are no stories of Jesus being born; there are no travels around Galilee, no miracles. The author just says that Jesus "performed signs and great wonders for the salvation of humanity." Instead, the gospel narrates a series of conversations between Jesus and his disciples and between Jesus and Judas.

- » The conversations in *Judas* take place in the days before Jesus's death. During these conversations, Jesus deprecates all the disciples, including Judas, but he never criticizes Judas as harshly as he does the other disciples. None of the other disciples know anything true about Jesus, and Jesus compares them to evil priests who are leading their followers to their deaths.
- » Eventually Jesus delivers a long speech of revelation to Judas, explaining the nature of God and the origin and destiny of this cosmos. After this revelation, the divine nature of Jesus departs toward heaven on a cloud, leaving only the human Jesus for Judas to betray. Next, the human Jesus is with his disciples in the upper room of some house, presumably sharing the Last Supper. Outside, Judas meets with Jewish leaders, accepts their money, and hands Jesus over to them. Then the gospel ends. The author expects that we know what happened next.
- » In *Judas*, Jesus announces that the god the disciples worship is not his God. This pronouncement angers the disciples, and Jesus challenges them: "Let whoever is strong among you people represent the perfect human being and stand before my face." In other words, Jesus wants to know whether any of the disciples belong to the saved people, those who are perfect, and whether any of them can display their perfection before him.
- » None of the disciples dare to answer Jesus—except for Judas Iscariot. Judas says, "I know who you are and where you have come from. You have come from the immortal aeon of the Barbelo. But as for the one who sent you, I am not worthy to say his name." Jesus commends Judas and promises to tell him mysteries that he has not told anyone else, mysteries about the kingdom. On the other hand, Jesus tell Judas that he will not go to that kingdom himself, but he will be grieved.

- » The scene in *Judas* echoes a similar one in Matthew. In both cases, Jesus poses a challenge to the disciples, and in both cases only one disciple steps forward and correctly identifies Jesus's divine identity—Peter in the Gospel of Matthew and Judas in the *Gospel of Judas*. And in both cases, Jesus commends that disciple, saying that he will receive a special revelation, and then condemns the disciple as Satan or someone who will not enter the kingdom.
- » Clearly the author of the *Gospel of Judas* wants the reader to remember the scene in Matthew and to make the comparison. Judas replaces Peter, and Judas's identification of Jesus as coming from the Barbelo aeon and a god that he cannot name contrasts with Peter calling Christ the Messiah and Son of God.

Understanding Gnosticism

.....

- » According to the *Gospel of Judas*, Jesus has come from the immortal aeon of the Barbelo and has been sent by a god whose name Judas is not worthy to say. Later in the gospel, in a long revelation speech to Judas, Jesus explains the view of God and the cosmos that lies behind Judas's statement. What Jesus tells is one version of the Gnostic myth, the basic narrative of God and creation that Gnostic Christians taught during the 2nd and 3rd centuries.
- » Jesus explains that the ultimate source of everything, the true God of all things, is the great Invisible Spirit. Not even angels have seen the Invisible Spirit, and it has not been called by any name. The Invisible Spirit unfolds into or emanates from itself a series of lower aspects or manifestations of itself. These aspects of God can be known by human beings, but only by those who are saved and gain knowledge—in Greek, *gnosis*.

- » We're used to thinking of Christians believing in one God who is also three—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But this idea, the idea of the Trinity, did not just pop up when Christianity began. Instead, Christians spent centuries debating how there could be just one God, yet also other aspects or manifestations of God, such as Jesus and the Holy Spirit.
- » The Gnostics drew on the Old Testament as well as pagan mythology and philosophy to answer this question. Above all, they turned to contemporary Platonism. Platonists of the 2nd century taught that there must be only one God, but that this one God must also be so spiritual and unitary that we cannot know him directly. Instead, God must emanate or overflow into lower aspects of himself, which we can know.
- » According to the Gnostics, the cosmos in which we live is separate from God and not ruled by God directly. Instead, as Jesus tells Judas, the universe in which we live is perishable and corruptible, and it's ruled by a lower divine being with two names: Nebro and Ialdabaoth. Ialdabaoth was appointed by the higher divine realm to rule over the chaos in which we dwell. He is assisted by his own set of angels, also called rulers.



- » Ialdabaoth is the king of chaos and Hades from whom the saved people can be liberated. Ialdabaoth, the god of the Old Testament and creator of this world, is not the true God, but a lesser ruler. Yet this is the god to which the disciples offer thanksgiving at the beginning of the *Gospel of Judas*. Jesus laughs at them for worshiping him.
- » The greatest theological contrast between the *Gospel of Judas* and the views of most early Christians lies in this notion that the God of the Old Testament is not the ultimate God—and what that says about Jesus. The Gospels of the New Testament identify Jesus as the Son of the God of Israel, the Creator God of the Old Testament. The *Gospel of Judas*, however, says that Jesus comes from a God higher and more spiritual than that god. It is, in fact, an error, a laughable mistake, to worship the God of Israel as the Father of Jesus.

The Role of Judas

.....

- » The first editors and translators of the *Gospel of Judas* suggested that this was a gospel in which Judas is the hero, the model for those who are saved. But other scholars quickly pointed to passages that do not show Judas so positively. Not only will Judas not enter the kingdom and be grieved, these scholars noted, but at one point Jesus calls Judas “the thirteenth demon.”
- » Judas, just as he does in the New Testament Gospels, plays a paradoxical role. In the New Testament, Judas betrays Jesus, and all the Gospels condemn him for this—they claim that Satan inspired him or that he did it for money. And yet, at the same time, what Judas did was necessary, part of God’s plan for the salvation of humanity. Judas does what he must do.

- » The *Gospel of Judas* takes a similar view. On one hand, Jesus tells Judas that what he will do is even worse than what the disciples have done. Jesus tells him, “You will sacrifice the human being who bears me.” On the other hand, Judas’s action will set in motion a series of events that will lead to the end of Ialdabaoth and his fellow rulers and the reorganization of this universe with Judas as its new ruler. The great race of Adam, the human beings who have true knowledge of God, will be elevated to their true home with the divine beings above this world.
- » The *Gospel of Judas* is more than an apocryphal alternative to the canonical Gospels—it seeks to be a correction of them. It gives the reader what it presents as the true understanding of the Gospels, their newly revealed Gnostic meaning. In this way, the reader is offered the opportunity to escape the fate of Peter and the disciples and become a member of “the undominated race” that has true knowledge.

LECTURE II

The *Gospel of Peter* and the Talking Cross

The apocryphal *Gospel of Peter* is mentioned in the writings of ancient Christian leaders as early as the year 200. Until the late 19th century, however, historians thought that nothing of the mysterious gospel had survived. In this lecture, you will learn about the amazing discovery of an excerpt from the *Gospel of Peter*, a text that has since become one of the most memorable of all the apocryphal gospels.



Statue of the apostle Peter

Early References and Discovery

- » It must have frustrated some early Christians that the apostle Peter left no gospel. After all, according to several gospels, Peter was highly prominent among the disciples of Jesus. According to Matthew, he walked on water at the invitation of Jesus, and Jesus called him the rock on which he would build the church. It would have been great to have the account of such a central figure in the ministry of Jesus.
- » In a strictly chronological sense, the earliest Christian known to have referred to a *Gospel of Peter* was Origen, the Christian scholar of the 3rd century. Origen suggests that the *Gospel of Peter* may report that the brothers of Jesus mentioned in the New Testament were actually sons of Joseph from a previous marriage. That's all he says.
- » In the early 300s, the great Christian historian and theologian Eusebius of Caesarea mentions the *Gospel of Peter* in his history of the church. Eusebius makes clear that it does not belong in the New Testament. It's Eusebius who tells us that Bishop Serapion of Antioch worried about the gospel around the year 200, fearing that it gave support to Christians who taught a heretical doctrine that he and others called Docetism.



- » Docetism was an attempt to explain how a divine being, the Son of God, could appear as a human being and do what human beings do, such as get hungry and tired, suffer, and, above all, die. As early Christians grew to believe that Jesus was divine, they sometimes had difficulty understanding how Jesus could also have suffered and died on the cross. And besides that, if Jesus was God, did he really need to eat, drink, or sleep like an ordinary human being?
- » Some Christians solved this problem by saying that Jesus was not really human at all. His body was not a human body like that of other human beings. Jesus only appeared to be human, and he did things like eat, drink, and sleep not because he needed to, but to maintain the appearance of a human being. Logically, then, his death must not have been real. Or, if it was real, the divine part of him must have left his body before he began to suffer and die. Opponents of this view referred to it as Docetism.
- » For centuries, historians believed that no part of the *Gospel of Peter* had survived. In the winter of 1886–1887, however, French archaeologists discovered an excerpt of the gospel in Greek in a tomb near Akhmim, Egypt. Scholars of early Christianity were amazed. A portion of the *Gospel of Peter*, which Bishop Serapion had discussed some 1,700 years earlier, had finally come to light.

Shifting the Blame

.....

- » The excerpt from the *Gospel of Peter* found at Akhmim opens with Jesus on trial before Pontius Pilate. It then goes on to describe the crucifixion, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. Finally, Mary Magdalene and other women discover the empty tomb, and the disciples return to their homes in grief. Peter and Andrew have just resumed fishing when the excerpt breaks off, incomplete.

- » Scholars disagree about how the *Gospel of Peter* relates to the canonical Gospels. Some have proposed that *Peter* predates the New Testament Gospels and served as a source for their versions of the trial and crucifixion. Most scholars disagree with this. Others say that the author of *Peter* made use of oral traditions that were also available to the New Testament Gospel writers. Even more scholars think that the author of *Peter* had available to him the canonical Gospels as written texts and based his gospel on them.
- » The differences with the New Testament Gospels are what makes the *Gospel of Peter* interesting. For one thing, *Peter* goes very far in shifting the blame for Jesus's death away from the Roman governor Pontius Pilate and onto the Jews. Of course, it's certainly plausible and even likely that some Jewish leaders cooperated with the arrest of Jesus, as we know that one of Jesus's own Jewish followers betrayed him. In the end, however, it was Pilate who ordered Jesus's execution.
- » Nonetheless, as soon as Christians began to write about Jesus's death, they began to minimize Pilate's role and maximize that of the Jews. The *Gospel of Peter* continues this tradition. When our excerpt opens, Jesus is on trial before Pilate. Pilate has just washed his hands and declared himself innocent, an event that also happens in the Gospel of Matthew. But *Peter* adds, "But none of the Jews washed his hands, nor did Herod or any of his judges." Not only did the Jews pointedly refuse to join in Pilate's gesture of innocence, it's now the Jew Herod, not Pilate, who orders that Jesus be taken away and crucified.
- » As Jesus is being crucified, one of the robbers being crucified with him rebukes the Jews for killing Jesus: "This one, the Savior of the people, what wrong has he done you?" he asks. His criticism so angers the crucifiers that they refuse to break his leg, thereby prolonging his suffering. When Jesus dies, the Jews are described

as glad. Throughout the excerpt, the followers of Jesus express their fear of the Jews, who they say will come after them as well.

- » Moreover, the author of *Peter* depicts Jews as explicitly proclaiming their guilt and error. After Jesus is buried, the author says, “The Jews, the elders, and the priests realized how much evil they had done to themselves and began beating their breasts, saying, ‘Woe to us because of our sins. The judgment and the end of Jerusalem are near.’”
- » Even though the *Gospel of Peter* is eager to convict the Jews of Jesus’s death, it lacks some details from the New Testament Gospels that support that idea. For example, we have seen that *Peter* includes from Matthew the story of Pilate washing his hands, thereby demonstrating his own innocence. Matthew, however, goes on to say that the Jews cried out, “His blood be on us and on our children!”—a detail not found in the excerpt of *Peter*.
- » *Peter*, in effect, turns Pontius Pilate into a Christian. After his soldiers witness the resurrection, they report everything to Pilate and tell him, “He actually was the Son of God.” Pilate responds, “I am clean of the blood of the Son of God; you decided to do this.” Pilate then orders his soldiers to say nothing about what they have seen, lest the Jewish people rise up and stone the leaders who led them into such a great sin. In this telling, Pilate confesses that Jesus is God’s Son and declares that other people are responsible for Jesus’s death.
- » Why were Christian authors so eager to exonerate Pilate and blame the Jews? The answer is to be found in the development of Christianity as a religion separate from Judaism in the period after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in the year 70. Christians grew increasingly bitter about the failure of the Jews to believe in Jesus, and the gospel writers projected that rejection into Jesus’s own lifetime.

- » As Christians became a group clearly distinct from the Jews, they attracted the attention of the Roman authorities as an independent group. The Christians wanted to have good relations with the Roman government. One problem was that their founding figure, the man whom they worshiped, had been executed by a Roman governor as a dangerous rebel. Gospel writers were eager to show that Jesus was in fact no danger. As they saw it, Jesus was innocent of the charges against him, and the Roman governor Pilate knew that. Pilate was not really responsible; the Jews were.

The Divinity of Christ

- » The *Gospel of Peter* places special emphasis on Jesus's divine nature. As we have seen, Pilate ends up identifying Jesus as the Son of God, but characters refer to Jesus in this way throughout the excerpt, albeit often sarcastically. The people who take Jesus away to be tortured say, "Let us drag around the Son of God because we have authority over him." Those who spit on, slap, and beat Jesus say, "This is how we should honor the Son of God!"
- » Other details show how the author wishes to make clear that Jesus really is divine. In the New Testament Gospel of Mark, as Jesus is dying, he cries out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" This verse worried some early Christians, as it suggested that Jesus was not God, that God had forsaken him, or that he was truly in despair. The author of the Gospel of Luke used Mark to write his gospel, and he simply omitted this cry. Instead, Luke has Jesus calmly announce, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit."
- » The author of *Peter* retained Mark's version, but changed it. In *Peter*, Jesus says, "My strength, O my strength, you have forsaken me!" Jesus does not say that God has abandoned him, rather that he has lost his own

strength or power. Basically, he's dying and becoming weak, which is, of course, what happens when one dies.

- » This emphasis on the divinity of Jesus climaxes in the resurrection. Unlike the Gospels in the New Testament, the *Gospel of Peter* actually describes the resurrection itself:

During the night on which the Lord's Day dawned, while the soldiers stood guard two by two on their watch, a great voice came from the sky. They saw the skies open and two men descend from there; they were very bright and drew near the tomb. The stone that had been cast before the entrance rolled away by itself and moved to one side. The tomb was open, and both young men entered.

- » At this point the soldiers wake up their commander, a centurion, and a group of Jewish elders who are also there. This is what they witness:

They saw three men emerge from the tomb, two of them supporting the other, with a cross following behind them. The heads of the two reached up to the sky, but the head of the one they were leading went up above the skies. And they heard a voice from the skies, "Have you preached to those who are asleep?" And a reply came from the cross, "Yes."

- » This remarkable scene has several things going on. To begin with, this is an early reference to the idea that, between his death and resurrection, Jesus preached to dead people and offered them postmortem salvation. This idea did not become widespread among Christians until the 3rd century.

- » Even more striking are the appearances of Jesus and the two young men or angels as giant figures and the walking and talking cross. Although the idea that the resurrected Jesus was so tall that his head was above the sky seems bizarre, there are verses in the New Testament Gospels also indicating that Jesus's body after the resurrection is not quite normal. The *Gospel of Peter's* exceptionally tall Jesus is a more extreme version of this idea, making it visibly clear that Jesus is a heavenly being.
- » The walking and talking cross is also strange, but it does make some sense. Very early Christians started to talk about the cross as itself a means of salvation. For example, Paul in 1 Corinthians calls his preaching "the message about the cross," and the author of Ephesians talks about Jews and non-Jews being made "one body through the cross." In the Gospels, Jesus says that people follow him by taking up their own cross. In the *Gospel of Peter*, the cross becomes Jesus's emblem, his partner in the salvation of humanity, and even a form of Christ himself.

LECTURE 12

The Apocrypha and Pilate's Sanctification

It would not be surprising if Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor who ordered Jesus's crucifixion, were one of the most reviled figures in Christian history. In fact, however, as soon as ancient Christians began writing gospels about the life and death of Jesus, they refashioned Pilate into a sympathetic figure. This lecture examines Pilate's transformation, which begins in the Gospels of the New Testament and reaches new heights in the apocryphal literature of early Christianity.



The crucifixion of Jesus

The Historical Pilate

- » It's not clear precisely when Pontius Pilate's service as governor of Judea began and ended. Most historians think his term lasted for approximately nine years. This is longer than any other known Roman governor of that province, and it suggests that Pilate did his job pretty well or, at least, that he had the confidence of the emperor in Rome, Tiberius.
- » Sources other than Christian gospels mention Pilate's governorship—most notably Philo, a Jewish scholar in Alexandria, Egypt, and Josephus, a Jewish historian of the 1st century. Both Philo and Josephus portray Pilate's rule as tumultuous and Pilate himself as violent and heavy-handed in his treatment of his Jewish subjects. However, modern historians believe that both authors were motivated to depict Pilate in a negative light. Pilate was probably no more or less violent and repressive than any other governor of Judea.
- » There's no reason to think that Pilate was especially cruel, but executing a rebellious Jew who might stir up trouble in Jerusalem did not require special cruelty under Roman rule. This was part of the governor's job—to keep the peace and to make the ultimate decisions in important judicial cases. Because the subjugated Jews had no authority to execute people publicly, Pilate had to be the one to sentence Jesus to death on a cross.

Early Christian Portrayals

- » Even the earliest Christians gospels work to shift responsibility for Jesus's death away from Pilate and onto the Jews. This is true of each of the four Gospels that later became part of the New Testament:

- ❏ Mark, the first gospel to appear, portrayed Pilate as a reluctant executioner. In Mark, Pilate knows that the chief priests accused Jesus out of jealousy. He offers the gathered crowd of Jews the choice of releasing either Barabbas, a prisoner, or Jesus. The crowd asks for Barabbas to be released and demands that Jesus be crucified. So Pilate hands Jesus over for crucifixion—only, the author says, to satisfy the crowd.
- ❏ The author of Matthew, who used Mark to write his account, goes even further in exonerating Pilate and emphasizing the guilt of the Jews. In Matthew, a dream reveals to Pilate's wife that Jesus is innocent and warns Pilate to have nothing to do with him. Without any basis in reality, the gospel depicts Pilate as helpless in the face of the Jewish crowd's demands for Jesus's death. Pilate washes his hands and declares himself innocent of the blood of Jesus.
- ❏ In Luke, Pilate three times declares that there is no basis for Jesus to be executed. "He has done nothing to deserve death," Pilate says. "I will therefore have him flogged and release him." When this option does not satisfy the crowd's demands for Jesus's crucifixion, Pilate relents and hands Jesus over.
- ❏ In John, Pilate repeatedly declares that he finds no case against Jesus. He agrees to Jesus's execution only when the Jews point out that Jesus has claimed to be a king, which sets him against the Roman emperor.

» Political reality and religious conflict motivated the Gospel writers to present the trial of Jesus this way. Christians were eager to show that they were not a subversive religion or a danger to the Roman state. Yes, their leader Jesus had been executed as a rebellious would-be

king, but Jesus did not claim to be an earthly king, only a heavenly one. Even the Roman governor Pilate saw this, and he allowed Jesus to be executed only to appease a Jewish mob.

- » Christians had also grown increasingly embittered toward the Jews for denying the claim that Jesus was the Messiah and Son of God. Christian authors portrayed the Jews as traditionally hostile to God's true prophets, and Jewish rejection of Jesus was just the latest and worst example of repeated disloyalty to God. Therefore, Christians claimed, it's no surprise that the Jews failed to recognize their own Messiah, and they even tried to have him killed.
- » This pro-Pilate and anti-Jewish trend reached a new peak in the 2nd century with the publication of the *Gospel of Peter*. According to this apocryphal gospel, the Jews conspicuously refused to wash their hands of Jesus's blood when Pilate did so, and Pilate himself ended up accepting that Jesus was in fact the Son of God.
- » Also in the 2nd century, we begin to find early Christians referring to documents associated with Pilate showing that Jesus was innocent and unjustly put to death. Around 160, the Christian teacher Justin Martyr claims that a document called the *Acts Recorded under Pontius Pilate* gives the most accurate information about Jesus's trial and death and verifies that Jesus performed miracles.
- » In the early 200s, the Christian author Tertullian states that Pilate made a report to the emperor, Tiberius, of all that happened with Jesus. According to Tertullian, this report shows that Pilate was a Christian in his conscience. We're not sure whether Justin and Tertullian actually possessed and read the documents they referenced, which were certainly forgeries, or whether they had just heard rumors of their existence.

- » In the early 4th century, the Christian historian and scholar Eusebius of Caesarea reports that there was a pagan text called the *Acts of Pilate* that was used to slander Jesus and to justify the persecution of Christians. Again, it's hard to say whether Eusebius actually read this purported text or had only heard about it.
- » In the 4th and 5th centuries, Christians began to create forged documents having to do with Pilate. Pilate was a featured character in a new gospel called the *Gospel of Nicodemus*, which dealt only with Jesus's trial, death, and resurrection. Other new texts appeared, including an official report from Pontius Pilate to Tiberius, correspondence between Pilate and King Herod, and accounts of Pilate's death. Most of this literature continued on the path of making Pilate a Christian.

The Gospel of Nicodemus

.....

- » The *Gospel of Nicodemus*, sometimes referred to as the *Acts of Pilate*, became a hugely popular text. It's found in more than 500 manuscripts and in languages such as Greek, Latin, Coptic, Armenian, Old French, and Welsh. The text was constantly revised, so different versions of it appear. There are two primary versions, usually called A and B.



- » Nicodemus is a character from the *Gospel of John*, in which he is a Jewish leader who actually believes in Jesus and sometimes supports him in arguments with other Jews. Unlike any other gospel, the *Gospel of Nicodemus* begins by identifying itself as a public record, something like an official report. The story then begins with the Jewish leaders going to Pilate and making accusations against Jesus.
- » The person or persons who put together this gospel went to a great deal of trouble to make it look like an official document that gives true records from the days of Jesus. The document gives precise dates and names, in the manner of imperial records, and it presents itself as having been written originally in Hebrew (as Nicodemus was a Jew).
- » By the purported time of this document, around 425, Christianity had been the official religion of the Roman Empire for about 30 years. Christianity was now an imperial practice, the state religion of the empire that had once persecuted it. The *Gospel of Nicodemus* integrates Christianity into Rome's own history and presents Pilate in ways that reflect how a converted Roman official should act.
- » In the *Gospel of Nicodemus*, Pilate expresses his belief in the pagan gods, but then becomes a witness to Christ's divinity. When the Jewish leaders tell Pilate that Jesus casts out demons by the power of Beelzebub, Pilate replies, "No one can cast out demons by an unclean spirit, but only by the god Asclepius." Pilate shrinks from questioning Jesus, protesting that as a governor he cannot interrogate a king.
- » A later scene dramatically visualizes the conversion of Rome to Christianity. When Jesus enters Pilate's hearing room, the images at the tops of the military standards bow forward and worship Jesus. The Jews who are present protest that this is some kind of trick, but when they find 12 strong Jewish men to hold the standards and make



Jesus come in a second time, the standards—the very emblems of Rome—once again bow down and worship him.

- » In the end, Pilate acquiesces to the Jews' demands for Jesus's death for political reasons. The Jews argue that Jesus really is a rival earthly king—this is why the magi brought him gifts, and this is why King Herod had tried to kill him. So Pilate gives in, washing his hands and declaring himself innocent of the blood of Jesus, whom he calls righteous. Pilate tells Jesus, "Your nation has convicted you for being a king."



- » In earlier gospels, a positive view of Pilate went along with an increasingly negative view of the Jews. The *Gospel of Nicodemus* presents a more complicated picture of the Jews. On one hand, the Jewish leaders are still the ones who caused Jesus's death, and they are unrelentingly hostile to Jesus and skeptical of reports of his resurrection. On the other hand, numerous Jewish characters testify to Jesus's righteousness and to his resurrection, including Nicodemus himself, and the gospel claims to have been written in Hebrew, the language of the Jews.

- » Especially in its closing scene, the *Gospel of Nicodemus* seems to present the Christian Roman Empire as the new Israel. If Jesus's memory endures, the Jewish leaders say—and it certainly did—then he will raise a new people for himself. The text seems to present the people of the Christian Roman Empire as the new people of God, with Jesus as their king, and it hopes that even Jews will be included in this new universal and eternal kingdom.
- » This theme continues in the longer B version of the *Gospel of Nicodemus*, where we get a description of Jesus entering hell between his death and resurrection and liberating the dead people there. Jesus, called the King of Glory, arrests Satan and turns him over to Hades for safekeeping until Jesus's second coming. Prophets and patriarchs, including Adam, David, Isaiah, Abraham, and John the Baptist, proclaim Jesus as the Messiah that they had long awaited.

Forgeries in Late Antiquity

.....

- » In addition to the *Gospel of Nicodemus*, there are a number of other forged documents from late antiquity that used Pilate to connect the beginnings of Christianity to the history of Rome. For the most part, these documents make Pilate a spokesman for the truth of Christian claims about Jesus. But sometimes they make Pilate a tragic figure, someone who must suffer for permitting the execution of God's Son.
- » One such forgery, a document in Greek entitled "Report of Pontius Pilate, Governor of Judea, Sent to Tiberius Caesar in Rome," gives away its composition in the 4th or 5th century by identifying Pilate as the one "who manages the rule in the East." This language reflects the later period when the Roman Empire was divided into eastern and western zones, and it mistakenly identifies Pilate as in charge of the entire Eastern Roman Empire.

- » Another false letter claims to have been written by Pilate to the Jewish King Herod of Galilee. In this letter, Pilate says that he allowed Jesus to be executed because Herod persuaded him to do so and because the Jews threatened rebellion. Once again Pilate testifies that Jesus rose from the dead. According to this forged document, Pilate's wife Procla became a believer first, and then Jesus appeared to Pilate and pronounced him blessed. The Jews, including King Herod, remain the real guilty parties.
- » King Herod admits his own guilt in yet another forged letter, this one from Herod to Pilate—also in Greek. The letter attempts to verify its authenticity with the following: “These records were set down by Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, the one who asked for the body of the Lord Jesus Christ.” These two Jesus-believing Jews are said to be the trustworthy transmitters of these records.
- » The historian Josephus tells us that Pilate was recalled to Rome after a violent suppression of Samaritans, but no legitimate ancient source tells us anything about Pilate's life after his term as governor. We have no idea where he lived or how and when he died. But the forged documents from late antiquity do not let this remain unknown.
- » A document called “The Handing Over of Pilate” claims that, when Tiberius received Pilate's report about the death and resurrection of Christ, he was furious. He ordered Pilate to be arrested and brought to Rome. There Tiberius rebuked Pilate for executing Jesus, saying, “It was clear from such signs that Jesus was the Christ, the King of the Jews.” At these words, the statues of the Roman gods nearby fell down and crumbled. According to this text, Pilate was executed for his crime, but he repented and believed in Christ. As a result, his death becomes something like a martyrdom, blessed by God. Pilate here truly becomes a saint.

- » Not all Christians liked this idea. Yet another forged document, entitled “The Letter of Tiberius to Pilate,” claims that Tiberius condemned Pilate as a criminal. Pilate’s punishment was to be bricked up inside a cave, and he didn’t last long. One day the emperor went out to hunt, and when he shot an arrow at a deer, it actually struck and killed Pilate. Somehow the arrow got through an opening in the brick wall and killed the former governor. In this document, Pilate does not receive forgiveness and blessing.
- » Despite this exception, a general trend was clearly emerging: Christian authors were turning Pilate into a witness to Christ’s divinity and resurrection. As Christians of the later Roman Empire looked back to their past, Pilate was the only named Roman official present at Jesus’s death, so they made him into a mascot for a Roman Empire that was now Christian. Among Christians in Egypt and Ethiopia, Pilate and Procla were even celebrated as saints.

LECTURE 13

Dialogues with the Risen Jesus

Several apocryphal gospels purport to record conversations between Jesus and one or more of his followers after his resurrection and before his ascension into heaven. In these post-resurrection dialogue gospels, Jesus tends to present teachings that differ from, expand upon, or deepen what he taught during his earthly ministry. This lecture considers three examples: the *Secret Book of John*, the *Gospel of Mary*, and the *Wisdom of Jesus Christ*.



The resurrection of Christ

The Secret Book of John

.....

- » One of the earliest surviving post-resurrection dialogue texts is the *Secret Book of John*. This fairly long work survives in four different Coptic manuscripts, which present two slightly different versions of the text. The Coptic manuscripts of the *Secret Book of John* were copied in either the 4th or 5th century, but the *Secret Book* itself was originally composed in Greek sometime in the early or mid-100s.
- » An early Christian bishop named Irenaeus tells us that the *Secret Book's* teachings come from the Gnostics, a group of Christians whom Irenaeus condemned as heretics. The Gnostics, whose name was derived from the Greek word *gnosis* (“knowledge”), claimed to have special knowledge of God. The *Secret Book of John* presents the Gnostics’ special knowledge as coming directly from Jesus.
- » The opening line of the book reads as follows: “The teaching of the savior and the revelation of the mysteries, which are hidden in silence and which he [the savior] taught to John his disciple.” Although the New Testament’s Gospel of Luke set the precedent for Jesus sharing secret teachings with his disciples after the resurrection, the *Secret Book* gets its primary inspiration from the Gospel of John.
- » The *Secret Book* begins with the disciple John going to visit the Temple in Jerusalem after the death and resurrection of Christ. On the way, he encounters a Pharisee named Arimanios, who tells John that Jesus has seriously misled him, taught him lies, and turned him away from the Jewish tradition. This conversation leaves John in some distress, and he starts asking some big questions:

- » How indeed was the Savior chosen? And why was he sent into the world by his Father who sent him? And who is his Father who sent him? And what is that realm like, to which we shall go?
- » These questions echo themes of the Gospel of John, which stresses repeatedly that the Father sent the Son into this world, that the risen Son has gone to another realm, and that Christians will follow him there.
- » While John is pondering these questions, the heavens open up, and all creation begins to shine with light. Christ appears to John as a child, morphs into as an elderly person, and then morphs into a young person, and these three shapes continue to appear through one another. The Savior speaks: “John, John, why do you have doubts, and why are you afraid?”
- » From here the Savior begins to make his revelation to John. The risen Jesus reveals to John the true meaning of the Jewish scriptures, and that true meaning consists of the basic Gnostic message: The God of the Old Testament, the God who created this world, is not the true, ultimate God who sent Jesus. Instead, the creator God is a lower, inferior god who’s hostile to human beings and whose true name is Ialdabaoth.



- » The Savior explains that the true God is a remote, unknowable, indescribable divinity whom he calls the Invisible Spirit. Much of the Savior's revelation is devoted to describing the nature and realm of the Invisible Spirit and explaining how it is that Ialdabaoth came into being and created this world.
- » The Savior tells John that the unknowable Invisible Spirit is the productive source of all life, and it has emanated into a complex structure of divine thoughts or aspects called aeons. Together these aeons make up an eternal and entirely spiritual realm of existence called the Entirety. Human beings cannot have any direct knowledge of the Invisible Spirit, but they can have some contact with the divine aeons—above all, with the closest aeon to the ultimate God, which is known as Forethought or the Barbelo.
- » Thanks to Forethought's incarnation in Jesus, we human beings can wake up from their state of ignorance and experience mystical knowledge of true divinity. If we gain this knowledge, upon our death, the spiritual element within us will return to the Entirety. If we fail to gain this knowledge, we will be reincarnated in this world until we do gain knowledge and thus salvation.
- » The Gnostic message of the *Secret Book of John* conflicted with the teachings of most other Christians on multiple points. First and most important, the Gnostics claimed that the God of the Old Testament was not the Father of Jesus Christ, but the malicious lower god Ialdabaoth. Second, the Gnostics called into question the value of this created world and of our physical bodies. Third, in the Gnostic understanding of events, Jesus does not really save people by dying on the cross for their sins. Instead, he serves as the vehicle for the revelation of *gnosis* from the Barbelo.

The Gospel of Mary

.....

- » Not long after the *Secret Book of John* was written, an unknown Christian wrote a text in Greek called the *Gospel of Mary*—the Mary being Mary Magdalene. Today only two fragments of the original Greek survive, both from the 3rd century. A much larger fragment of a Coptic translation is part of a codex in Berlin that also contains a copy of the *Secret Book of John*.
- » Unlike the *Secret Book of John*, the *Gospel of Mary* is not Gnostic. It has some ideas that are similar to Gnostic myth, but it does not have the Barbelo aeon or the malicious creator god Ialdabaoth. It does, however, agree with the Gnostics that there are hostile spiritual powers in the heavens above us, and a major part of the dialogue consists of Jesus explaining to Mary how the human soul can ascend to heaven past these lower powers.
- » The surviving text of the *Gospel of Mary* begins with Jesus conversing with the disciples after the resurrection. Jesus makes three main points. First, Jesus says that matter and the material world are ultimately not real. At some point matter will dissolve and cease to exist. Second, Jesus says that there's no such thing as sin. While this may seem surprising, Jesus goes on to explain that what we call sin is actually what we produce when we fall into ignorance and turn away from the Good. Third, Jesus condemns passion—unhealthy emotions like anger, grief, and resentment—as arising from matter and ignorance. He urges his disciples to be content and inwardly peaceful.
- » After Jesus departs, the disciples become distressed and weep. They fear that people will kill them as they did Jesus. Mary then

stands up and tells the disciples to stop worrying. God's grace will protect them, Mary says, so they should be resolute.

- » That's when Mary reveals a special teaching that the Savior gave only to her. The Savior told Mary that after death the human soul will need to ascend past certain hostile powers, such as Darkness, Desire, and Ignorance. These powers try to prevent the soul from ascending to its true home, but if the soul tells them about its true nature, then it can pass them by.
- » When Mary finishes her report, Andrew and Peter charge that Mary is lying. Andrew says that the ideas she claims that Jesus taught her are strange, and Peter argues that Jesus would not reveal such things to a woman in private. Mary weeps and says she is not lying.
- » The apostle Levi comes to Mary's defense. He accuses Peter of being prone to anger and says that Jesus did in fact love Mary more than he loved the men because he knew her so well. The Coptic version of the gospel ends with all the apostles going forth to teach and preach. In the Greek version, only Levi does so.
- » There is a similar conflict between Mary and Peter in the apocryphal *Gospel of Thomas*, which was probably written decades before the *Gospel of Mary*. There Peter objects to the presence of Mary, saying, "Mary should leave us, for females are not worthy of life." In response, Jesus says, "I shall guide her to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males." Not exactly a message of feminine liberation, but another instance in which an objection to full female participation in the Christian community is placed in the mouth of Peter, and Peter is rebuked.

- » The *Gospel of Mary* reminds us that, even as Christianity was developing a hierarchy of all-male priests, some Christians objected and argued that the full inclusion of women was part of Jesus's original teaching. In this case, an author used the higher validity of a post-resurrection dialogue gospel to make that case.

The Wisdom of Jesus Christ

.....

- » Mary Magdalene also appears in the *Wisdom of Jesus Christ*, the third post-resurrection dialogue text found in the Coptic codex in Berlin. A second copy of the Coptic translation was found at Nag Hammadi in 1945, and a fragment of the original Greek text survives. The Greek fragment was found at Oxyrhynchus in Egypt, and it probably dates to the 4th century. The *Wisdom of Jesus Christ* itself was probably written sometime in the 3rd century.
- » The author of the *Wisdom of Jesus Christ* made use of several other texts to compose his gospel. One of these was a work called *Eugnostos the Blessed*, which is also found in Coptic translation in a codex from Nag Hammadi. The author also used the *Secret Book of John*, other



Gnostic texts, and the New Testament. The result is a somewhat meandering dialogue that has many ideas in common with Gnostic myth, but is much simpler in its theology.

- » The gospel opens with a description of its setting. It says that, after Jesus rose from the dead, “his twelve disciples and seven women continued to be his followers. They went to Galilee, up on the mountain called ‘Peace and Joy.’” The disciples are described as confused about basic concepts of the universe and especially about what’s called “the secret plan of salvation.” The Savior appears to them, not as he looked before his death, but as an “invisible spirit.” Jesus wishes the disciples peace and then asks what they want to learn about. Philip says, “About the nature of the universe and the plan of salvation.”
- » The first thing Jesus tells the disciples is that people are made from dust. From the beginning of the world, people have asked about God, but have not found him. Philosophers, Jesus says, have offered three theories about the order of the universe: “Some of them say that the world governs itself; others say that divine forethought governs it; and still others say that fate is in charge.” Jesus says that all these opinions are wrong. Instead, the Savior says, “I have come from infinite light; I am here, and I can tell you exactly what the truth is.”
- » That truth turns out to be a dramatically simpler version of the Gnostic myth: This world is in fact governed by Ialdabaoth and his fellow rulers. The world is perishable, and everything that comes from it is also perishable. But there is a realm that’s imperishable. Presiding over that realm is a distant, unnamable God, whom Jesus refers to as The One Who Is. No one knew The One Who Is until Jesus came. As Jesus says, “I have come from the infinite to tell you everything.”

- » The One Who Is is the ultimate source of all imperishable life, but he caused to appear a God closer to us, called the immortal Human. The immortal Human is androgynous, an ideal of humanity, the model for our creation and the source of our salvation. The immortal Human has a companion, the great Wisdom. So as it turns out, the title of the book, the *Wisdom of Jesus Christ*, has a double meaning, referring both to the wisdom that Jesus teaches and to Wisdom, the divine being.
- » Humanity came into this world as a droplet of divine light, sent by the immortal Human and Wisdom so that it might be guarded by the ruler of the universe, Ialdabaoth. But Ialdabaoth's ignorance has led him not to guard the droplet of light, but to imprison it. And thus the Savior has come to free human beings from their bondage in this world—to awaken us, so that we may be made perfect and restored to the light from which we came.
- » The Savior doesn't say much about what all this means in terms of ethical behavior, with one big exception: He strongly condemns sexual activity, which he calls "the unclean sexual rubbing from the ferocious fire of the flesh." True Christians will escape the forgetfulness associated with the world's authorities by giving up sex and becoming virginal spirits, free of sickness and weakness.

LECTURE 14

Hope and Adventure in the *Acts of John*

An early Christian work called the *Acts of John* is one of a set of early Christian writings collectively called “the apocryphal acts of the apostles.” In this entertaining text, the apostle John raises six people from the dead, bedbugs obey the apostle’s command, and a lusty young man cuts off his own genitals. The text also contains serious ideas, however—ideas about the divinity of Christ, about his ability to bring salvation to people who suffer, and about the need for moral living.



The ascension of Christ

Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles

- » The earliest Christian writings are the letters of Paul, which he wrote in the 50s of the 1st century. It wasn't until the 70s that Christians began writing stories, and these were stories about Jesus—the Gospels. The earliest Gospel, Mark, gives us a narrative of Jesus's ministry, death, and resurrection, and so do Matthew, Luke, and John. But their narratives are not very artful or sophisticated, even by ancient literary standards. This likely reflects the fact that Christians originally transmitted stories about Jesus orally, in chunks that could be easily remembered and repeated. The Gospel writers put this material together in writing their longer narratives.
- » The Acts of the Apostles, however, has a higher level of narrative sophistication and more interest in entertaining characters and stories. Characters like Peter and Paul deliver long, well-constructed speeches, and there are stories that develop slowly and build real suspense and excitement. There are moments of real emotional impact, and



there is even some comic relief. Luke, the author of Acts as well as of the Gospel that bears his name, probably composed much of Acts from his own imagination or from tales that Christians shared, which would have been more artful.

- » Apocryphal texts like the *Acts of John* build upon the Acts of the Apostles. The New Testament Acts gives us a few adventures of the apostles Peter and Phillip, but then it focuses mainly on Paul. The apocryphal acts tell about adventures of Peter and Paul that are not in the New Testament and about the apostles that Acts did not cover. Moreover, they follow the example set by the author of Acts with stories that are even more complex, emotional, and exciting.
- » With their melodramatic and action-oriented stories, the apocryphal acts are very similar to other ancient novels. We may find them comical and over-the-top, but they actually show that Christian authors were becoming more sophisticated. Christian entertainment was going mainstream.
- » The various apocryphal acts may share similar novelistic elements and plot devices, but they do not share the same theological outlooks. Some have theological ideas that came to be seen as orthodox, or they aren't very theological and instead simply offer edifying stories about the heroic apostle. Other apocryphal acts have theological ideas that came to be seen as dubious or even heretical, and some became popular among later religious groups that Christians saw as heretical, such as the Manicheans.
- » Only one apocryphal act survives completely intact: the *Acts of Thomas*. The remaining apocryphal acts survive in fragments or in manuscript traditions that are messy and hard to figure out. Such is the case with the *Acts of John*. It survives fragmentarily, with

episodes no longer in the original order. In some manuscripts, there are even parts that really do not belong to it. The *Acts of John* is such a mess because, although it has entertaining stories, its view of Jesus ended up being seen as not only problematic, but truly heretical.

Stories in the *Acts of John*

.....

- » The *Acts of John* probably dates to the late 2nd century or early 3rd century, although some of its stories may be older. The stories in the *Acts of John* are sometimes funny and charming. Other times, they are melodramatic and grotesque.
- » An example of a funny and charming story in the *Acts of John* is the story of John and the bedbugs. As John and his companions are traveling, they stop at an inn. The bed in which John sleeps turns out to be filled with bed bugs, which torment the apostle. Finally, he commands them, “I say to you, bugs, you must behave yourselves, one and all. Leave your home at once and settle quietly in a single spot, and keep your distance from the servants of God.” When John’s companions wake up, they find the apostle sleeping soundly and a huge mass of bed bugs gathered near the door.
- » It’s a fun story—even the author of the *Acts of John* calls the bedbug story “delightful”—but one with a clear moral: We human beings should be as obedient to God as the bedbugs were to John. Some scholars, however, have suggested that there may be more to the story. The Greek word for “bug” is very similar to a Greek word for “girl.” Thus the story may be an instruction to Christian leaders not to sleep with women, but to banish them from their beds as John did.

- » For something completely different, consider the tale of the adulterous farmer. John is told in a dream to travel outside the city of Ephesus. There a young farmer has been sleeping with a woman married to someone he works with. When the farmer's father tells him to stop it, the farmer kicks his father and kills him. Distraught over what he had done and unwilling to face the humiliation of arrest and execution, the young man draws his scythe and flees. He plans to commit suicide.
- » The farmer encounters John, who gets him to tell his story. John agrees to resurrect the father if the young man will agree to give up his adulterous affair. The farmer agrees, and John prays to God and raises the father. The father follows John back to Ephesus and converts to Christianity.
- » Meanwhile, the young farmer is so ashamed of all this that he uses his scythe to cut off his genitals. He runs to the house of his mistress and throws his severed genitals in front of her. "Because of you," he says to her, "I killed my father, and I would have killed you, your husband, and myself. Now you have the image and source of this horror. God has had mercy on me, so that I could know the divine power."
- » The now unsexed farmer goes to John and tells the apostle what he has done. John is not impressed. He tells the young man that Satan inspired him to mutilate himself, just as Satan inspired him to commit adultery. The problem, John says, is not the sexual organ itself, but the thoughts that motivate it. He encourages the young man to repent and learn about the wiles of Satan, and then God will help him with all his spiritual needs. The story ends with the young man repenting and turning to a peaceful life; he resolves never to leave John.
- » Like the bedbug story, this is an entertaining tale, but not because it's funny, but because it's so dramatic and weird. The young farmer is

way out of control—sleeping with a coworker’s wife, kicking his father to death, planning to commit suicide, then cutting off his genitals and throwing them at his lover. He behaves almost like an animal. On one level, you don’t need to know much to get the moral of this story. Sexual desire can lead you to act in wild and destructive ways. As John says, you should beware of Satan and try to live a peaceful life, as the farmer ends up doing.

- » But on another level, the story may be criticizing Christians who took too severe a view of the body and sex. In the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 19, Jesus refers to men who have “made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven.” There are reports that some early Christians interpreted these words literally and castrated themselves to achieve sexual purity. Or, less literally, some thought that the body itself is evil because it leads to sex. Here, the author may have John criticize such extreme views: Sexual immorality, such as adultery, is wrong, but it’s our own inner desires, tempted by Satan, that are to blame, not the body and its sexual organs, which are good.



Antique map of Asia Minor

- » These stories may be sensational, but they are not theologically controversial. So what was suspect about the *Acts of John*? For one thing, the author elevates the apostle John to the disadvantage of the apostle Paul. In the *Acts of John*, John brings Christianity to Ephesus, a major city in Asia Minor. But according to the Acts of the Apostles in the New Testament, it was Paul who first brought Christianity to Ephesus. The *Acts of John*, however, never mentions Paul.
- » Even more controversial is the presentation of Jesus in the *Acts of John*. In this text, Jesus is fully and completely God—so much so that he is not human, he can take multiple shapes, and he is not really separate from God the Father. All these ideas became problematic as Christianity developed.

The Hymn of the Dance

.....

- » Heretical as it may have been, the *Acts of John* communicates a profound spirituality—above all, in its so-called Hymn of the Dance. As the apostle John remembers Jesus’s final hours, he recalls that, just before he was arrested, Jesus invited his disciples to join him in a hymn. John says:

Jesus had us join hands and form a circle. Placing himself in the middle, he said, “Respond to me with ‘Amen,’” and he led off the song.

- » What follows is a hymn and dance that an early Christian community most likely once performed. The leader begins with praise of God: “Glory to you, Father,” and the people in the circle, as they move around, say, “Amen.” As the responsive hymn continues, the distinction between the leader, who speaks as Christ, and the singing people begins to fade:

I wish to be saved, and I wish to save.

Amen.

I wish to be freed, and I wish to free.

Amen.

I am a mirror to you who perceive me.

Amen.

Eventually, the leader of the hymn says:

In response to my dance, see yourself in me as I speak.

Learn what suffering is, and you will possess the capacity to escape it.

- » Throughout the *Acts of John*, John proclaims Jesus, who is God, as the one who delivers and saves those who are suffering. Through this dance, worshipers become fully united with the divine Jesus, the one who did not really suffer, and in this way they escape their own suffering.

LECTURE 15

Social Disruption in the *Acts of Paul*

The *Acts of Paul*, an apocryphal text composed in the late 2nd century, is a carefully composed piece of literature, a Christian novel that speaks to a literate and intelligent audience. Although most of the original Greek text is lost, the overriding theme of the *Acts of Paul* survives: Roman society—the household, the city, and the empire itself—is corrupt and oppressive, but God cares for and protects those who are victimized by the empire’s power structures.



Mosaic in the Hagia Sophia

Money and the Household

.....

- » The *Acts of Paul* is fragmentary; we have only a few major chunks of the text. In most of these, Paul interacts with one or more households. Some of these families support Paul and his mission, but others are dysfunctional and require Paul's healing. Still others Paul disrupts, usually by persuading wives or children to become Christians and to separate from their other family members.
- » For example, in the city of Myra, on the southern coast of modern-day Turkey, Paul becomes involved with the family of a man named Hermocrates. Hermocrates suffers from edema, and Paul cures him in spectacular fashion by causing a massive amount of water to gush out of his body. Hermocrates and his wife Nympha then convert to Christianity and receive baptism.
- » But Hermippus their son is not pleased: He had hoped that his father would soon die, so that he could collect his inheritance. He and his friends plot to kill Paul, but the scheme somehow results in the death of Hermippus's brother Dion. Paul, however, resurrects Dion.



Statue of the apostle Paul

- » Hermippus renews his attack on Paul, armed with a sword and accompanied by friends with clubs. Paul warns the young men that God will protect him and turn their strength into weakness. “I am a slave of God,” Paul declares, “alone and a stranger, small and meaningless among the polytheists. But you, O God, look down upon their plots and do not let them annihilate me.” God then strikes Hermippus with blindness. This causes Hermippus to repent. “The world is nothing,” he says. “Money is nothing. All possessions are nothing.”
- » Eventually Paul restores sight to Hermippus, and he too becomes a Christian. The entire family reconciles, and they collect and distribute food and money to widows.
- » In this story, the wealthy family of Hermocrates is torn asunder by greed, but when the family members become Christian, they redirect their wealth to the support of widows, women who lack families. A new Christian household is formed, one that includes people who are alone and strangers, such as Paul and the widows.
- » In this and other episodes, money is a big part of the family story because in Roman society the household was as much an economic unit as it was a kinship unit, more so than are many households today. The Roman household consisted not only of the nuclear family of parents and children, but also of slaves, former slaves, and other people economically dependent upon or closely tied to the core family group. Producing and distributing money were key functions of the household.
- » As the *Acts of Paul* presents the situation, in the pagan household, money causes greed and alienation, and members are valued only for their potential to produce wealth. In the new Christian household, money still plays a big role, but now vulnerable people like widows

are included, and money is given away to those who have need. Once it is healed by Paul, the household of Hermocrates and Nympha becomes a good Christian household that supports an apostle like Paul and widows.

Paul in Rome

.....

- » The New Testament Acts of the Apostles ends with Paul under arrest in Rome. Although the author does not say so, he implies that Paul died there as a martyr. According to Acts, Paul was arrested in Jerusalem when he caused a riot. Local Jews accused Paul of bringing Gentiles, non-Jews, into an area of the Temple that was open only to Jews. The resulting violence led to Paul's arrest, and because Paul was a Roman citizen, he was transported to Rome so that the emperor could hear his case.
- » In the *Acts of Paul*, Paul does not even go to Jerusalem, much less visit the Temple. Instead, while he is in the Greek city of Corinth, Paul himself decides to go to Rome, although this idea fills him and his fellow Christians with dread. The Holy Spirit inspires a Christian named Myrta to say that Paul will save many people in Rome. The gathered Christians give Paul money to support his journey and mission.
- » Once in Rome, Paul receives a warm welcome from the Christians there, and he preaches at some length. But once again he comes into conflict with a prominent household—in this case, the household of the emperor. One of the emperor's slaves, a cupbearer named Patroclus, listens to Paul preach while sitting in a high window. Thanks to the work of Satan, Patroclus falls to his death. When Nero hears this news, he becomes very upset.

- » As you might guess, however, Paul raises Patroclus from the dead. When Patroclus shows up to serve wine at dinner, Nero is shocked. “Who brought you back to life?” the emperor asks. “Christ Jesus, the king of the ages,” Patroclus replies. Patroclus goes on to tell Nero that Jesus will destroy all kingdoms and that he alone is eternal. He identifies himself as a soldier of the king Christ Jesus, and then four more of Nero’s leading men declare, “We too serve in the army of the king of the ages.”
- » Although Nero loves these men, he sends them to prison and has them tortured. He has Paul brought before him, and Paul tells Nero that Christ recruits his soldiers from every kingdom and that no wealth will spare Nero from his power. The emperor has numerous Christians burned alive, but he orders that Paul be beheaded because of his legal status as a citizen. Paul tells Nero that he will appear to him after his death.



Ancient Roman coin depicting the emperor Nero

- » Paul continues to recruit new Christians right up until his death. Nero sends two sets of agents to supervise and check on Paul's execution, and in each case Paul tries to persuade them to become believers. He warns them that, if they do not believe in Christ, they will perish in the coming destruction of the world.
- » When Paul's head is chopped off, milk sprays out on the soldiers, and everyone there is amazed. Milk has many religious meanings, but here it most likely symbolizes Paul's teaching of new converts. In his First Epistle to the Corinthians, Paul described his teaching of new Christians as milk. Solid food is for those more advanced in faith. Here the emperor's men, the soldiers, and the other witnesses are brought to faith by Paul's death, and thus from the dying Paul they receive the milk of Christian teaching.
- » As he promised, after his death Paul appears to Nero. "Caesar, behold Paul, the soldier of God," he says. "I have not died but live. Many dreadful things will happen to you because of the righteous you have killed." In fear Nero releases the remaining Christian prisoners, including Patroclus the cupbearer.

Major Themes

.....

- » From beginning to end, the *Acts of Paul* presents a Christianity that disrupts the social order. Paul is the stranger, the foreigner, the soldier of another, heavenly king. He preaches of a single God who will bring the current world order to an end, destroying those who worship idols and who are enslaved to money and sex. Salvation will come to those who believe in Christ.
- » This message divides households, bringing husbands and wives and parents and children into conflict. It threatens the city, which

depends on stable households and worships the pagan gods. And it challenges the empire, which follows a false king named Nero.

- » At the same time, however, the Christian community offers a new family, a new household, in which women play a larger role and in which widows and the poor are included and cared for. And the members of the community look forward to a new kingdom, ruled by the eternal king, Christ.
- » Not all Christians welcomed this message of social disruption, female empowerment, and inclusion of the poor, however. The author of the *Acts of Paul* may have wanted to challenge the institutions of the household, the city, and the empire, but he ended up challenging the institution of the church as well.

LECTURE 16

Thecla: Independent Woman of the Apocrypha

The apocryphal *Acts of Paul* features a Christian woman named Thecla, a virgin who is devoted to the apostle Paul. Almost all critical historians agree that Thecla probably did not exist. Nevertheless, the story of Paul and Thecla reveals something about the history of early Christianity, showing that Christians who admired Paul disagreed about the role of women and the importance of celibacy well into the late 100s.



Thecla is an important woman in the apocrypha.

The Ballad of Paul and Thecla

- » Thecla enters the story of Paul shortly after the apostle arrives in Iconium in Asia Minor. There Paul settles in the house of Onesiphorus and his family, where he celebrates the Eucharist and preaches. Paul's sermon concerns "self-control and resurrection," and with a series of blessings he praises virgins and others who keep their bodies pure. Thecla is sitting at a window in her own house; she hears Paul and becomes entranced. She sees women and girls going to hear Paul's message, and she too wants to follow him.
- » Thecla's devotion to Paul and his message of virginity draws her away from her mother, Theocleia, and her fiancée, Thamyris. Especially Theocleia describes Thecla's attraction to Paul in very erotic terms: Thecla has a "novel lust"; she is "intoxicated" and "swept away" by the stranger.
- » Theocleia's and Thamyris's opposition both to Paul and to Thecla's devotion to him initiates a series of events in which both Paul and Thecla face imprisonment, trials, and possible execution. Most of the time Thecla must face her dangers alone, separated from Paul, whom she loves deeply. When she is reunited with Paul at one point, Thecla offers to cut her hair short so that she can look like a man and so travel safely and follow Paul wherever he goes. Paul advises against this, and he likewise refuses Thecla when she asks to be baptized. Be patient, Paul says.
- » Thecla faces her greatest danger when she resists an attempted rape by a prominent citizen of Antioch named Alexander. Alexander is a wealthy man who is planning to pay for the upcoming games in the city, which would include fights between gladiators and criminals being thrown to wild beasts. Thecla tears his cloak and knocks from

his head a crown that indicates his role in sponsoring the games. Alexander is humiliated, and he arranges to have Thecla arrested for sacrilege and condemned to the beasts.

- » Remarkable things happen during Thecla's trials, which take place in Antioch. For one thing, the city divides between men and women, with men calling for Thecla's execution and women defending her. Thecla gains a key supporter in a local noblewoman named Queen Tryphaena, a widow whose daughter has died. The male-female divide extends even into the animal kingdom in the arena: a lioness protects Thecla from other beasts and ends up dying as she fights against a hostile lion.
- » Equally remarkable is how Thecla gets baptized. While she's in the arena, she sees a large pit filled with water. Ignoring the fact that the pool is filled with voracious seals, Thecla decides to jump into the pool and baptize herself. "In the name of Jesus Christ I am baptized on my last day," she cries out. A flash of lightning causes all the seals to perish and float on the surface dead.



- » Having survived multiple near-death experiences, Thecla becomes a Christian leader in her own right. Tryphaena gives her financial support, and she and the women of her household become Christians. Thecla recruits a following of young men and women, dresses like a man, and sets out to reconnect with Paul. When she finds him, she makes a confident declaration: “I have received the bath, Paul. For the one who has worked with you for the gospel has also worked with me for the washing.”
- » After discussion and prayers, Thecla tells Paul, “I shall go to Iconium.” Paul replies “Go, and teach God’s message.” Thecla shares some of Tryphaena’s wealth with Paul for the care of the poor. She then returns to Iconium and enters the house of Onesiphorus. There she sits where Paul sat and begins to teach. The author then tells us that Thecla later moved to Seleucia, where she died. Seleucia is where the largest cult devoted to Thecla developed during the 4th century.

Thecla and the Role of Women

.....

- » Much of Thecla’s story has features that resemble other ancient novels, which usually focused on a romantic couple. The relationship between Paul and Thecla has romantic, even erotic aspects. They are frequently separated, as couples in novels were, and Thecla is always desperate to find Paul. Thecla’s adventures are dramatic and miraculous, and there’s a happy ending. All this does not suggest historical accuracy.
- » But the story also communicates some strong theological messages. Celibate Christians and virgins are especially blessed, and leaders like Paul and Thecla are certainly celibate. Although married Christians like Onesiphorus play an important role in the community, Christian commitment may require separation from spouses

and parents. God cares particularly for the oppressed, and the future resurrection is what Christians hope for.

- » With a few exceptions, such as Paul and Onesiphorus, male characters are negative, and they oppose Thecla. With the exception of Theocleia, Thecla's mother, women are positive, and they support Thecla. Thecla baptizes herself, dresses like a man so that she can travel safely, and is commissioned by Paul to teach God's word. Although wary at first, Paul ends up approving of all of this.
- » Most historians believe that, even if the story of Thecla is fictional, there probably were Christians who admired Paul and who valued celibacy, who criticized traditional marriage and the household, who believed strongly in the resurrection and God's care for the oppressed, and who allowed women, perhaps celibate women, to teach, preach, and even baptize.

Epistolary Insights

.....

- » We can learn more about the debate over women's leadership, virginity, and marriage by examining the New Testament letters of Paul. After all, the author of the *Acts of Paul* believed that he was following and enhancing Paul's authority when he told the story of Thecla.
- » Among the 13 letters in the New Testament that are attributed to Paul, scholars agree on the authenticity of seven: Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon. In contrast, there are three letters that practically no critical scholar believes that Paul wrote: 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, and Titus. Collectively, these three letters are known as the Pastoral Epistles, and they most likely come from the same author.



The *Acts of Paul* places emphasis on chastity.

- » In places, it appears as if the Pastoral Epistles were written precisely to oppose the teachings we see in the *Acts of Paul*. For example, the Thecla story strongly supports virginity; Paul blesses Christians who keep their bodies pure, and Thecla renounces marriage with Thamyris. Thecla's decision to remain a virgin seems to be an important basis for the leadership role she comes to play. 1 Timothy, on the other hand, condemns Christians who supposedly forbid marriage, and it urges Christians to choose as leaders men who are married and have managed their wives and children well. The author encourages widows who are not too old to get married again.
- » The apocryphal *Acts of Paul* on the one hand and the canonical Pastoral Epistles on the other represent a 2nd-century debate among Christian admirers of Paul about the meaning of Paul's legacy for



women in Christian communities. If we turn to the seven authentic letters of Paul in the New Testament, we can see why this debate developed—and why each side could claim that they were advocating what Paul stood for.

- » First, there is no doubt that Paul advocated celibacy and preferred it to marriage. In chapter 7 of 1 Corinthians, Paul tells Christians that he wishes everyone could be as he is—celibate. And he says that married Christians are divided in their commitments: They cannot be completely devoted to the Lord, but must also serve their spouses. The time is short, Paul says, and with the kingdom of God approaching, it's best not to do things like get married. Let even



those who have wives be as though they had none. This sounds a lot like the Paul of the *Acts of Paul*, who proclaims, “Blessed are those who have wives but do not have sexual relations with them, for they will be heirs of God.”

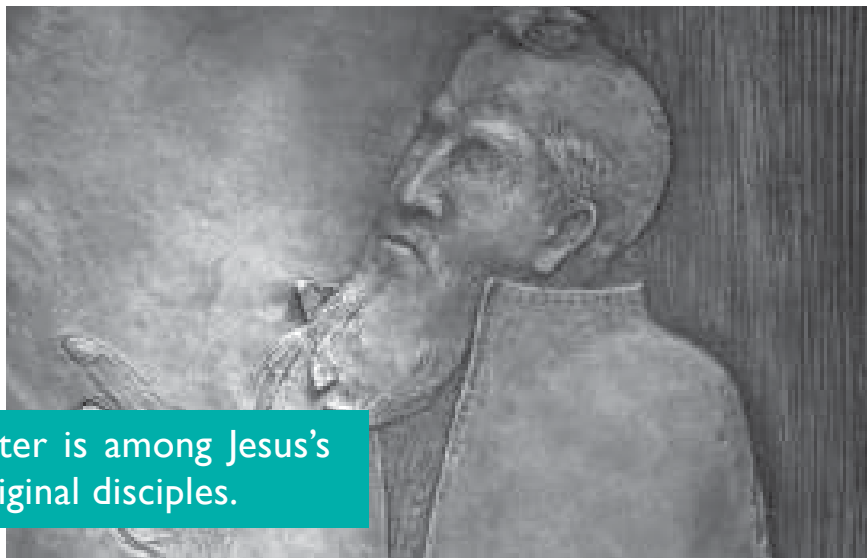
- » On the other hand, Paul acknowledges that not everyone has the gift of celibacy. If a Christian is in danger of not being able to control the sexual urge, he or she should get married. “Better to marry,” he says, “than to burn with passion.” And it’s clear that married people were an important part of Paul’s network of congregations. Their households, such as that of Onesiphorus, provided material support and meeting places for Paul’s groups.

- » Likewise, Paul shows ambivalence about the activities of women in his congregation. On one hand, his letters show that there were several prominent, active women in his ministry network. In his Epistle to the Romans, Paul commends a woman named Phoebe, whom he calls a deacon in her congregation near Corinth. Paul worked with Prisca and Aquila, a well-known husband-and-wife missionary team, who appear also in the Acts of Apostles and the *Acts of Paul*. In Romans 16, Paul commends Andronicus and Junia, presumably Andronicus's wife. He calls them "prominent among the apostles." Thecla seems to stand in this Pauline tradition.
- » On the other hand, consider what Paul says in chapter 11 of 1 Corinthians. There Paul objects to the practice of women praying and prophesying without some sort of head covering. The apostle does not object to women praying and prophesying—he seems perfectly fine with that—but he does insist that women look the way he thinks women should look while doing so. In arguing for his position, Paul clearly subordinates women to men. He explains that God is the head of Christ, Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of the woman. A woman who prays with her head unveiled brings disgrace on her head, the man.
- » Paul himself left an ambiguous legacy on the questions of celibacy, marriage, and the role and status of women. Later followers of Paul tried to resolve this ambiguity. Some remembered him as an advocate of celibacy and women's leadership. From them we have the *Acts of Paul*, with its story of Thecla. Others remembered him as a supporter of marriage and an advocate of male headship and female subordination. From them we have the Pastoral Epistles.

LECTURE 17

Miracles and Magic in the *Acts of Peter*

As the New Testament presents him, Peter is the leader among Jesus's original disciples, but he is a flawed leader. In the apocryphal *Acts of Peter*, the apostolic hero offers his own story as encouragement to other Christians. The *Acts of Peter* looks back to the New Testament, and its author or authors tried to create a work that shows Peter having the same character as in key passages of the New Testament.



Peter is among Jesus's original disciples.

Surviving Manuscripts

.....

- » The *Acts of Peter* is a mess in the manuscripts. No complete copy of a single original Greek text survives, and a minority of scholars doubt that there ever was a single *Acts of Peter*. What we have survives in three major pieces. The longest piece is a Latin text in a manuscript that dates to the 6th or 7th century. The second major piece survives in Greek in multiple manuscripts. The third piece survives in a Coptic manuscript.
- » Scholars vigorously debate how these major pieces relate to one another and whether they all go back to a single original *Acts of Peter*. We can probably never know the answers to these questions. But most scholars agree that these pieces share similar themes and therefore relate to one another somehow. It has thus become standard to treat all of these pieces as a single *Acts of Peter*.

Peter's Daughter

.....

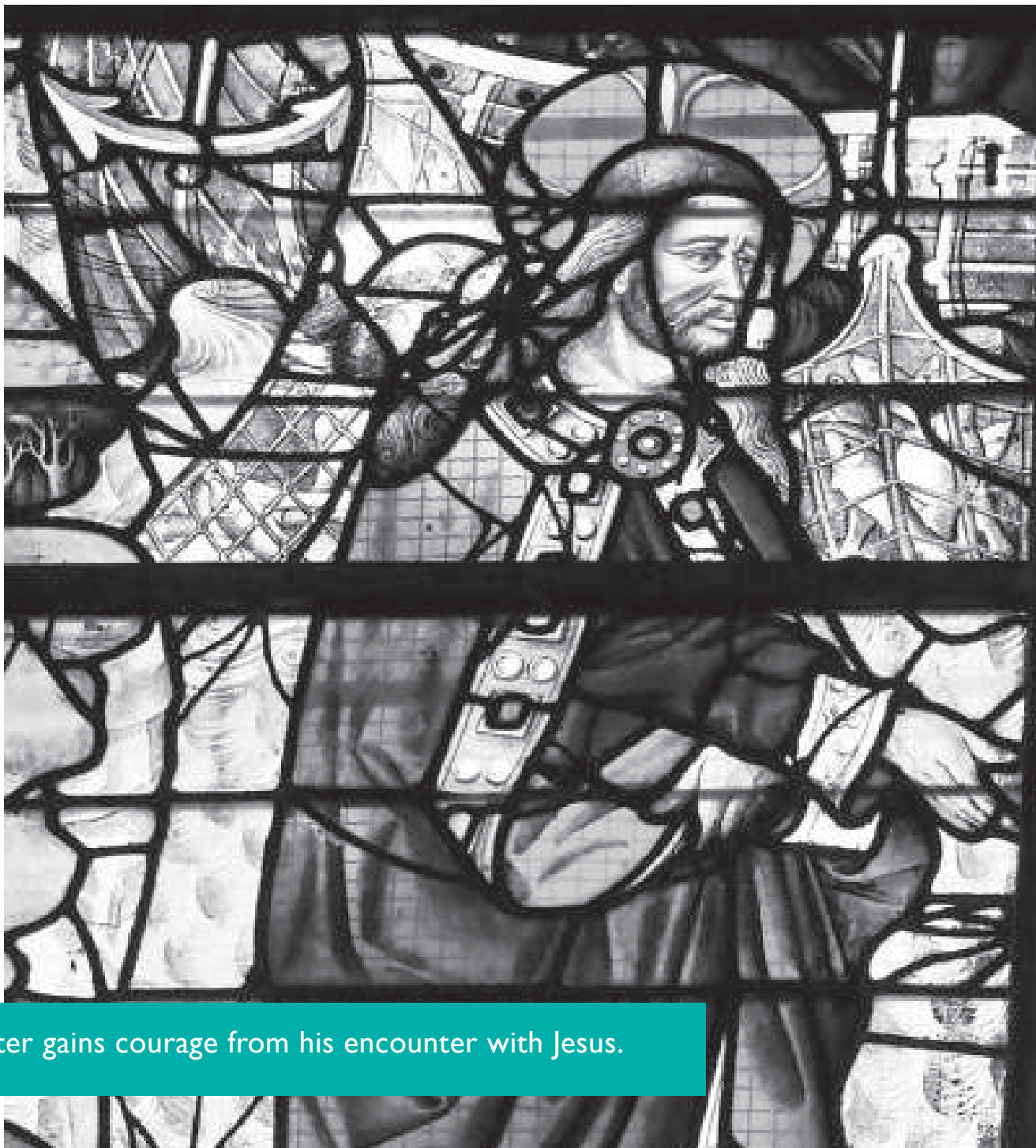
- » The Coptic fragment of the *Acts of Peter* tells a story that takes place when Peter is still doing mission work in Judea or Galilee, before he goes to Rome. Peter has been healing many people of various diseases and infirmities, and the crowd asks Peter why he has not healed his own daughter, an unmarried virgin. One side of her body is paralyzed, and she sits in a corner, disabled.
- » Peter agrees to heal his daughter. He commands her to get up and walk, and she does. The crowd rejoices. But then Peter tells his daughter to return to her corner and resume her paralyzed state, and she does. The crowd weeps and begs Peter to heal her again, but Peter says that his daughter's paralysis is beneficial for both him and her.

- » Peter says that, when his daughter was born, he had a vision. God told him that his daughter will be a trial for him, and as long as her body is healthy, she will do harm to many souls. And indeed, when the girl turns 10, a very rich man named Ptolemy sees her great beauty and falls in love with her. He demands to have the girl as his wife, but her mother, Peter's wife, refuses his repeated requests.
- » Ptolemy abducts the girl, planning to keep her until she turns 12, the legal age for marriage. But God prevents the marriage by striking the girl with her paralysis. Ptolemy has his men secretly return the girl to the home of Peter and his wife. The parents praise God for saving their daughter from what they call defilement, pollution, and destruction, and the daughter remains paralyzed.
- » Meanwhile, Ptolemy cries himself blind and decides to commit suicide. But a divine voice tells him to go visit Peter. There Ptolemy's blindness is healed, and he repents of his behavior. Later, when Ptolemy dies, in his will he leaves a field to Peter's daughter. Peter sells the land, and he gives all the proceeds to the poor.
- » His daughter's paralysis protected her from the lustful advances of Ptolemy, and it serves as a sign of how a person can repent, receive forgiveness, and do good. The moral of this story is clear enough, but the reader may still find it off-putting. After healing his daughter and allowing her to walk, Peter returns her to her paralytic state. This healing miracle in reverse seems cruel.
- » Although the reader may feel that Peter acts harshly by paralyzing his daughter, the point of the miracle is not his daughter's well-being. Peter carries out this to have an effect on those who see it. In the *Acts of Peter*, Ptolemy repents of his lust, and the crowd who hears the story learns a lesson in repentance and forgiveness.

Simon the Magician

.....

- » Christian missionaries weren't the only people who were believed to perform miracles in the ancient world. Lots of other religious specialists did as well. How, then, could a person tell who was a legitimate agent of God, performing miracles by divine power, and who was merely a magician, performing miracles by deceptive means or even by the power of Satan? This question lies at the heart of the conflict between Peter and his great rival, Simon Magus. The contest between these two men in Rome takes up nearly all of the large Latin fragment of the *Acts of Peter*, but it has its roots in the New Testament.
- » According to the Acts of the Apostles, Simon is a magician who has amazed the people of Samaria with his amazing feats. "This man is the power of God that is called Great," people say. But then the Christian apostle Philip shows up in Samaria, and he too performs great signs and miracles as he proclaims the message of Christ. Soon people turn to Philip and accept baptism, including Simon, who is especially drawn by the miracles Philip performs.
- » Then Peter and John arrive in Samaria, and they lay hands on the new believers, so that they might receive the Holy Spirit. When Simon sees this, he offers the apostles money, saying, "Give me also this power so that anyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit." Peter is appalled that Simon would think the power of God can be bought and sold. He calls on Simon to repent of his wickedness. Here the episode ends, and we never hear of Simon again in the book of Acts.
- » From this brief incident Simon became known as Simon Magus, Simon the Magician, and he became one of the chief villains in early Christian literature and history. There are three aspects to his



Peter gains courage from his encounter with Jesus.

wickedness that became big in Christian thought. First, he wanted to buy with money the power of granting the Holy Spirit. Second, Simon was a believer who went bad. He became a baptized Christian, but then it became clear that Satan was operating through him to corrupt the Christian community. Third, Simon performed miraculous deeds, just as the apostles did, but he was not a messenger of God. He was a magician, empowered by Satan or by deceptive tricks.



- » It's this last theme that's prominent in the *Acts of Peter*. Basically, Peter and Simon Magus compete with each other in performing amazing deeds. Eventually Peter out miracles Simon, revealing that Peter's power comes from God, while Simon is a mere magician. The *Acts of Peter* emphasized that Peter and the apostles were not magicians, but men empowered by Christ. Notably, the *Acts of Peter* does not deny that non Christians like Simon really do perform miracles. It just claims that they do so by demonic power, not by the power of God.

- » Peter triumphs over Simon, whom the text calls “the messenger of the devil.” But the author makes clear that Simon could have had a better end. Peter at one point declares that God would forgive even Simon if he would repent. But Simon never does. He trusts only in his magic, and it fails him.

Peter’s Martyrdom

.....

- » Numerous Romans watch the prolonged competition between Peter and Simon, including many wealthy people, senators, and other powerful men. But none of them show any interest in arresting Peter—until he starts converting prominent women and turning them against their men. The *Acts of Peter* does not really push virginity, however. Instead, newly Christian wives and concubines who give up sex are more of a plot device, providing the motivation for Peter’s enemies to seek his execution.
- » Agrippa and Albinus, prominent men jilted by their partners as a result of Peter’s teachings, plot to have Peter arrested and executed. Albinus’s wife warns Peter, who decides to flee Rome. But then comes one of the most famous scenes in the *Acts of Peter*. Jesus himself meets Peter as the apostle is leaving the city. Peter asks, “Lord, why are you here?” Jesus says, “I am going into Rome to be crucified.” This encounter brings Peter to his senses, and he returns to the city to accept his fate with courage.
- » At his crucifixion, Peter delivers a speech in two parts. The first part comes as he approaches the cross. He addresses the cross directly: “O name of the cross, hidden mystery!” Peter will embrace the cross as the means of his release from this world and as an expression of God’s unspeakable and inseparable love. Peter then says that he is

going to reveal the hidden mystery of the cross. Christians should not consider the cross as a visible thing, as a simple tool of execution. Rather, the true meaning of the cross is something else. It is instead what Peter calls “the entire mystery of your salvation.” Then Peter asks to be crucified with his head down.

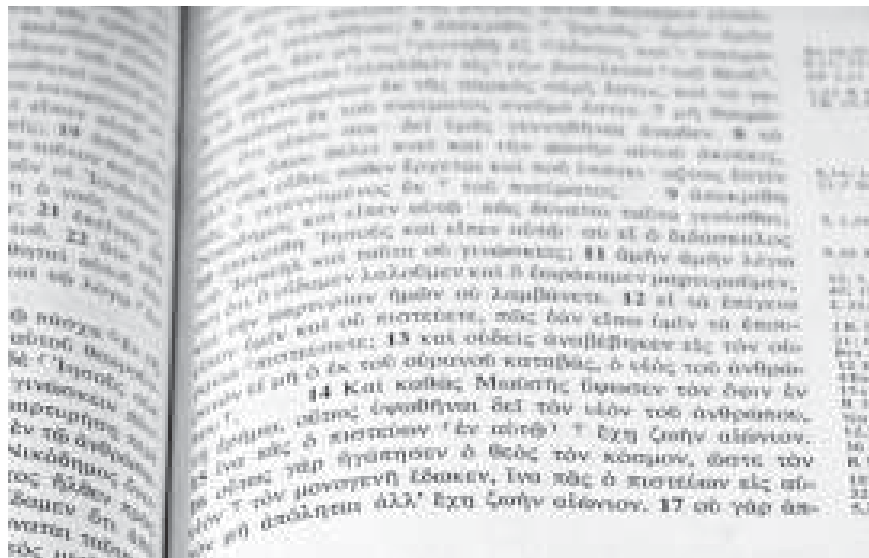
- » Once he is hanging on the cross, Peter resumes his speech. He explains that his upside-down position symbolizes the fall of the first human being, Adam. By sinning Adam fell head downward, and he brought disordered reversal to the cosmos. Adam himself began to see things the wrong way. He “considered beautiful the things that are not beautiful, and good the things that are in reality bad.” Adam’s sin also changed the cosmos, so that this world is no longer the way God intended. Everything has been turned upside-down.
- » What people need to do, Peter says, is turn everything right-side up through conversion and repentance. In support of this, Peter cites a saying of Jesus that doesn’t appear in the New Testament, but that does appear in a somewhat different form in the *Gospel of Thomas*: “Unless you make the things on the right as the things on the left and the things on the left as the things on the right, the things above as the things below, and the things behind as the things in front, you will not recognize the kingdom.” In other words, conversion and repentance reverse the disorder of sin and bring forgiveness from God. The upside-down Peter symbolizes that repentance.
- » Peter concludes his speech with a prayer, and then he dies. The senator Marcellus takes Peter’s body and buries it. Peter appears to him in a vision, and Marcellus’s faith is confirmed. The author tells us that Marcellus and his fellow Christians then waited for Paul’s return to Rome from Spain.

- » The *Acts of Peter* ends on an ambivalent note. The emperor Nero learns that Peter has been killed, and he gets angry because he wanted to torture Peter more. The frustrated Nero begins to persecute the Christians in Rome. But then he has a vision in which he is being scourged by someone who says, “Nero, you cannot persecute or destroy the servants of Christ. Keep your hands off them!” Frightened, Nero stops persecuting the Christians.
- » In the final line, the author tells us that the brothers and sisters all rejoiced in unison. And yet, the reader has been told that Paul will return to Rome, and most readers know that Paul too will be executed in Rome—and at the command of Nero. So the joy of the Roman Christians will not last. But, as the *Acts of Peter* tells it, thanks to the victory of Peter over the magician Simon, the Christians have a stronger faith that will enable them to endure. And if they don’t, Peter has taught them that God will forgive them if they repent.

LECTURE 18

Peter versus Paul in the Pseudo-Clementines

The *Homilies of Clement*—also known as the *Pseudo-Clementine Homilies*, because Clement is not the real author—poses huge problems for historians of early Christianity. Narrated in the first person by a man who calls himself Clement, the text survives in only a couple of manuscripts in the original Greek. Another version of the same novel, called the *Recognitions of Clement* or the *Pseudo Clementine Recognitions*, survives completely in Latin and fragmentarily in other languages. Together scholars call these texts the *Pseudo-Clementines*.



Narrative Overview

.....

- » Clement was a leader of the Christian church in Rome in the last decade of the 1st century. On behalf of his fellow Roman Christians, he wrote a letter to the Christians in Corinth in Greece sometime in the 90s. We don't know what position in his church Clement may have held, but later tradition identified him as the bishop of Rome. This is who the author of the *Pseudo-Clementines* is claiming to be.
- » The basic plot of the novel recounts the adventures of Clement's family, and it follows the pattern of what are called recognition stories. Various family members get separated from one another and often think that the others are dead, but they reunite in implausible, amazing ways.
- » According to Clement, his family was an important one in the city of Rome. His mother, Mattidia, was a relative of the emperor. Clement had two older brothers who were twins. Clement's father is Faustus, and his older brothers are Faustinus and Faustinianus. When Clement was a little boy, his mother Mattidia claimed to have



had a dream that told her she must leave Rome with her two older sons and go to Athens. We later learn that Mattidia was escaping the amorous advances of her lecherous brother-in-law.

- » For several years, Faustus heard nothing from his wife and sons, even though he kept sending them money for their support. Finally, in despair, when Clement was 12 years old, Faustus handed him over to guardians and left to go find Mattidia and the twins. The novel opens 20 years later, with Clement aged 32 and never having heard from his father again. Clement assumes that all of his family members are dead.
- » As the novel progresses, we learn that none of these people are dead. Mattidia and the twins were shipwrecked and separated, and likewise his father survived but without any money. Eventually, they all reunite and become Christians.
- » This plot gives the novel drama, suspense, and poignancy—that is, it makes it very entertaining. But the plot also serves two important theological themes of the text. First, the *Pseudo-Clementines* celebrate marriage and the family as the best path for the Christian life. In this way, it differs from the apocryphal acts of the apostles, which hold up virginity or celibacy as superior to marriage and sometimes even condemn marriage altogether. Second, the story is intended to show that everything happens by divine providence. The miraculous reunion of Clement's family illustrates this principle.
- » The plot also provides the framework for the religious drama of the novel, and that's the persistent conflict between the hero Peter and his nemesis Simon. Clement has a front-row seat for this struggle because he ends up as a member of Peter's entourage as he travels around the eastern Mediterranean preaching the gospel and disputing with Simon.

Learning from Peter

.....

- » When the novel opens, Clement finds himself in a kind of spiritual and intellectual depression. He has morbid thoughts of death and wonders what it would be like not to exist. This leads him to question the existence of this world—how and when did it begin, and what’s going to happen to it? All this ruminating on death and the meaning of everything makes him physically ill. Looking for an emotional and physical cure, Clement decides to attend lectures by philosophers, but instead of finding answers, he just finds conflicting opinions. Clement is in despair.
- » This kind of situation appears in other early Jewish and Christian texts. The human hero is in despair about life or truth, even suicidal. Often it’s at this point that an angel or another divine being appears and shows the hero truths about God and cosmos. That doesn’t happen here. Instead, Clement hears rumors about a man in Judea who is proclaiming to the Jews the kingdom of God. He performs miracles, and he promises eternal life to people who turn to the one God of the Jews and follow his commandments. Clement is intrigued—and hopeful.
- » Clement follows Peter on his journeys, and he sees the apostle establish Christian communities in the cities that he visits. Before he leaves, Peter always appoints a bishop to lead the community after his departure. In this way, each church has a leader who had personal contact with Peter, just as Peter had personal contact with Jesus. The novel dramatizes the concept of apostolic succession, which developed in the late 2nd century as a means of combating heresy. According to this idea, bishops can guarantee the truth of what they teach because they hold their office in lines of personal contact and appointment that go back to a founding apostle.

- » In one of his sermons, Peter emphasizes the importance of good church order, which pleases God. Each city must have a bishop, to whom everyone must listen. Below the bishop are elders, also called priests. They carry out the orders of the bishop. And below them are deacons, who look after the physical and material needs of the Christians and report to the bishop. For the sake of morality, everyone, including the clergy, should be married. A traditional ethical life of marriage and family goes along with an orderly and obedient church structure.

Simon and Paul

.....

- » In many episodes, the novel displays Peter's superior authority and teaching by contrasting him with Simon, who visits just about as many cities and towns as Peter does. Simon comes from the Acts of the Apostles, where he is a magician who joins the Christian community. But then he tries to purchase the power of the Holy Spirit from the apostles, and Peter condemns him as wicked. In the *Acts of Peter*, Simon appears primarily as a magician, just as in Acts. He and Peter engage in an extended duel of miracles, in which, of course, Peter prevails over the magician.
- » In the *Pseudo-Clementines*, however, Simon is more than a magician. He teaches all sorts of bad doctrines—which all turn out to be heresies that concerned orthodox Christian leaders in the 3rd and 4th centuries. Simon doesn't have much of a coherent philosophy. Rather, he acts as a composite figure for a variety of heretical notions. He and Peter have several duels, but not of miracles; rather, they engage in debates over Christian teaching.
- » Why does God allow someone like Simon to exist and to plague Peter for so long? Peter explains this in one of his speeches. He says

that, although God is one, he has chosen to teach human beings through opposites. Throughout history, Peter says, the bad always precedes the good. This pattern continues with Simon and Peter. Peter explains:

By following this sequence anyone can understand to whom Simon belongs, who first went to the Gentiles before me, and to whom I belong, who came after him, appearing as light after darkness, as knowledge after ignorance, as healing after sickness. Thus, as the True Prophet told us, first a false gospel must come through a certain deceiver, and then, after the destruction of the holy place, a true gospel must be propagated secretly in order to rectify the existing heretics.

- » It was not Simon, however, who first brought a Christian gospel to the Gentiles. It was Paul. The author has modeled Simon in part on Paul: He brought the gospel to the Gentiles, but it was a false gospel, requiring Peter to correct it and bring the true teaching.
- » In another episode, a man simply called “one of the enemies” comes to Jerusalem and violently attacks the Christians. He throws the apostle James down the steps of the Temple and leaves him for dead. Who is this murderous enemy? None other than Paul, for the author then tells us that the enemy went off to Damascus to persecute the Christians there, just as Paul is said to have done in the New Testament.
- » In the New Testament, it’s on the road to Damascus that Jesus first appears to Paul—in a flash of light—and persuades him to give up persecuting Christians and instead follow him as the Messiah. Paul himself, in his letter to the Galatians, says that Jesus appeared to him and commissioned him to bring the gospel to the Gentiles.

Paul may never have met Jesus, and he may have originally persecuted Christians, but he received revelations from Jesus, who appeared to him and made him an apostle.

- » The *Pseudo-Clementines* attack this idea as well. In one of their disputes Simon and Peter debate which is better—learning from a teacher by being physically present with him or by receiving a vision. Simon argues that a vision is superior. If you listen in person to a human teacher, you always have to consider whether what you’re hearing is true or not. Maybe it’s not really God speaking, maybe it’s just a human being, who can make mistakes. A vision, however, is certain. If God appears to you in a dream or vision, it’s really God—no question.
- » Peter refutes this assertion at length. If a prophet, through miracles and the like, shows that he is God’s spokesman—as Jesus did—then whatever he says must be infallible. And the only people who can know and retain what the True Prophet speaks are those who have heard him in person. Dreams and visions are unreliable. Peter tells Simon that, even if Jesus did appear to him and speak to him for an hour, that hardly compares to the years that Peter spent in Jesus’s physical presence.
- » Again, Peter may be debating with Simon, but this is really an attack on the authority of Paul. Paul’s gospel cannot be trusted because, unlike Peter and the original apostles, he did not know Jesus personally. For all we know, the visions he claimed to have received were from demons, not Jesus or God.
- » Why all this hate for Paul? Like most apocryphal literature, the *Pseudo-Clementines* are drawing on material from the New Testament to address the concerns of their own day. The gospel Paul teaches is

that God now welcomes Gentiles, non-Jews, to the community of the righteous, based solely on their faith in Christ.

- » But that message had critics from among the Christian community. In Paul's Epistle to the Galatians, Paul suggests that Peter was originally one of those critics. He says that he went to Jerusalem to meet with the so-called pillars of the church, especially James, John, and a disciple named Cephas whom everyone agrees is Peter. It sounds as though Cephas and the others at first opposed Paul's message, but then agreed to it at this meeting.
- » But then, according to Paul, later on in Antioch Cephas and Paul had a major falling-out. Paul assumed that, if Gentile Christians don't have to keep kosher, then Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians can eat together, even if the food is not kosher. Cephas disagreed and would not eat with the Gentile Christians. Paul accused Cephas of hypocrisy.
- » In the Acts of the Apostles, all this appears differently. Peter and Paul get along, and Peter is always on board with Gentiles not having to observe the Jewish Law. But the *Pseudo-Clementines* show that some Christians retained a memory of Peter and Paul as opponents. Moreover, this novel takes the alleged side of Peter: It advocates that Christians must indeed observe the Jewish Law in some way.

LECTURE 19

The *Acts of Thomas* and the Mission to India

In the *Acts of Thomas*, composed in the first half of the 3rd century, the apostle Thomas travels to India, converts many people, attracts the anger of a king, and dies as a martyr. The text has a distinct theological outlook, emphasizing the salvation of the soul and its separation from the body, the close relationship between the human soul and the divine Jesus, and withdrawing from this world through celibacy, poverty, and fasting.



The temple at Mahabalipuram

Relationship to Other Texts

.....

- » Of all the apocryphal acts of the apostles, the *Acts of Thomas* is the only one that survives in complete copies. We do not have the earliest version, however. The text survives primarily in two languages, Greek and Syriac, but we're not sure which language was the original. Most scholars today tend to think that the *Acts of Thomas* was originally written in Syriac, but that the Greek version we have today is closer to the original.
- » The *Acts of Thomas* builds on both the *Gospel of Thomas* and the *Book of Thomas*. Like these earlier works, the *Acts of Thomas* identifies Thomas as Didymus Judas Thomas, and it depicts Thomas as Jesus's brother—in fact, Jesus's twin or double. This does not mean that Jesus and Thomas were born at the same time, only that they are brothers and they look alike.
- » In the *Gospel of Thomas* and the *Book of Thomas*, the resemblance between Jesus and Thomas symbolizes that the human self is a mirror image of God—to know yourself is to know God. The *Acts of Thomas* has that theme as well, but it also plays out the resemblance literally. That is, at times Jesus appears to people, and he looks like Thomas. People think they are seeing Thomas when they're actually seeing Jesus.
- » The *Acts of Thomas* shows the teachings of the *Gospel of Thomas* in action in other ways, as well. The *Gospel of Thomas* teaches that people should become “single ones” by giving up sex and money and devoting themselves to Jesus and the kingdom of God. The *Acts of Thomas* shows people actually doing so.

Celibacy and Charity

.....

- » The *Acts of Thomas* depicts Thomas sailing for India and arriving at a city called Andrapolis. There he come upon the wedding of the local king's daughter. Thomas sings a long poem in Hebrew that describes the marriage of a bride and groom. One of the servers slaps Thomas, presumably in response to the poem, and the apostle responds by predicting that the server's hand will be dragged by dogs. And that's what happens—a lion attacks the server outside the banquet hall shortly thereafter, and a black dog brings his severed hand into the banquet.
- » This amazing event draws the attention of the king, who asks Thomas to come to the bridal chamber and pray for the bride and groom. Thomas prays to Jesus as the one who “reveals hidden mysteries and discloses secret words,” and he asks Jesus to do for the couple what is “helpful, suitable, and beneficial to them.” Thomas and the family members leave the bride and groom, but before the newlyweds can consummate their marriage, Jesus appears in the bridal chamber in the form of his twin Thomas.
- » Jesus persuades the couple not to have sex, but to devote themselves to “the imperishable, the true marriage”—that is, to become married to God instead. In arguing against sex, Jesus warns of the problems of having children. Most children, he says, turn out to be useless. Either they have terrible health problems like epilepsy or paralysis, or they become criminals.
- » The couple decide not to have sex, and the next morning they announce their decision to their shocked family members. The bride says that she has fallen in love with her Lord, who has taken away her garment of shame. The groom gives thanks to Jesus. He says that



The *Acts of Thomas* places a strong emphasis on celibacy and sexual purity.

Jesus “showed me how to seek after myself and to know who I was, who I am, and how I exist in the present, so that I might again become what I was.” In other words, Jesus has enabled the groom to know himself and thereby to know God. He can recover the spiritual self he once was.

- » As in so many of the apocryphal acts, the message of Christianity leads people, especially married people, to give up sex. That’s the first thing that happens in the *Acts of Thomas*, and it is later what gets Thomas killed. Thomas persuades several prominent women to embrace Christianity and no longer to sleep with their husbands. This infuriates their powerful husbands. Eventually even the king’s wife turns toward Thomas and away from her husband, and for this reason Thomas is executed.
- » The *Acts of Thomas* places celibacy front and center, suggesting that all Christians who get baptized should give up sex. It relentlessly

presents sex as negative. Adultery, Thomas says, is the worst of all the sins—worse than murder. Demons make women their sex slaves. An earnest young man kills his girlfriend when she will not join him in Christian celibacy. Sex is never presented positively, and no good Christians continue to have intercourse.

- » True Christians in the *Acts of Thomas* not only give up sex, they also give up their wealth. After Thomas and Jesus disrupt the wedding night of the couple in Andrapolis, Thomas travels on to see King Gundaphar. When he arrives, Gundaphar asks Thomas whether he can build a palace, and Thomas says that he can. The king shows him where he wants the palace to be, and Thomas dutifully takes measurements and presents Gundaphar with a design plan. The plan pleases the king, who gives Thomas money to get the project started and then leaves.
- » Over the next several months, King Gundaphar continues to send Thomas money for the palace construction, but Thomas does not use the money for construction. Instead, he gives all the money away to the poor. Eventually, the king comes to see his new palace, and he is dismayed to learn that it does not exist. When Gundaphar confronts Thomas, the apostle tells him that the king does indeed have a new palace. “You can’t see it now,” Thomas says, “but when you leave this life, then you’ll see it.”
- » Gundaphar is furious, and he decides to have Thomas flayed and burned alive. But just then, the king’s brother Gad dies. Angels take Gad’s soul to heaven and ask him where he would like to live among the various dwelling places there. Gad sees a magnificent palace, and he asks to live there. No, the angels say, that’s the palace that Thomas has built for your brother Gundaphar. Gad then asks to be allowed to return to his body, so that he can try to buy this palace from his brother. The angels allow this.

- » Gad's soul returns to his body, and he tells Gundaphar about the great palace he has in heaven. The king then understands that all the money he gave to Thomas and that went to the poor has created this place for him in heaven. Both he and Gad accept Thomas's message, and they get baptized. From then on they help those in need, giving gifts and relief to all.

Dragons, Pearls, and the Human Soul

.....

- » The theology of the *Acts of Thomas* strongly emphasizes our basically spiritual nature. It encourages us to liberate ourselves from this world. There's definitely a life after death, but it's our soul, not our body, that will live on in either heaven or hell. The *Acts of Thomas* has no place for the idea of a resurrection of the body. Our body is part of this world and must be left behind.
- » This theology finds its most eloquent expression in a hymn that Thomas sings when he's in prison and awaiting his death. This hymn, called the Hymn of the Pearl, does not appear in every manuscript of the *Acts of Thomas*, but it expresses perfectly the spirituality of the text. Among many poems, hymns, and prayers in the book, the Hymn of the Pearl stands out for the beauty of its imagery and the depth of its meaning.
- » In the hymn, a prince speaks in the first person. He tells of living in his father's royal palace amid wealth and luxury somewhere in the East. But his parents send the prince on a mission. He is to go to Egypt and bring back a single great pearl, which is guarded by a fierce dragon. They give him gold, silver, and jewels to support his journey, but they take from him a prized possession: a special jewel-studded garment, shot with gold, that had been tailored just for him.

- » Guides accompany the young prince and lead him to Egypt, but then they depart after he enters the country. The prince camps near the den where the dragon keeps the pearl, and he waits for the dragon to fall asleep. Meanwhile, to fit in and not look like a foreigner, the prince dresses in the local clothes. And even though a handsome person also from the East warns the prince to keep his distance from the Egyptians and their impurities, the prince eats the food of the Egyptians, and he forgets who he really is. The prince no longer remembers his mission to gain the pearl.
- » From far away the king and his wife learn of their son's negligence, and they send him a letter. "Arise, and become sober out of your sleep," the parents tell him. "Listen to the words written in this letter. Remember that you are a child of kings. You have fallen under a servile yoke. Call to mind your garment shot with gold."
- » This message from his parents brings the prince back to his senses. He recalls his true identity and his mission. The prince subdues the dragon simply by calling out his father's name. He then takes the pearl, strips off what is described as the dirty clothing of the Egyptians, and starts back home.
- » And yet the prince still can't quite remember the splendor of his father's palace—until he has a vision of his garment, shot with gold. Not only this, but the prince sees woven into the garment the image of the King of Kings, and there are "motions of knowledge rippling through it." And then the garment speaks: "It is I who belong to the one who is stronger than all human beings and for whose sake I was designed by the Father himself."
- » The Hymn of the Pearl is clearly an allegory. It may start out as a kind of fairy tale, but it takes an unmistakably symbolic turn when

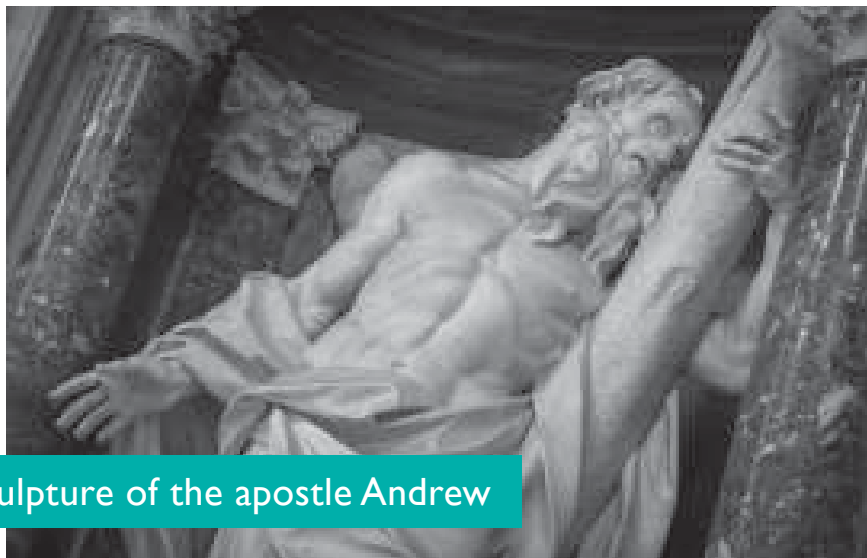
the garment has motions of knowledge rippling through it and the prince can subdue a dragon simply by saying his father's name.

- » Historians disagree about the precise meaning of the hymn, and it's virtually certain that the hymn originally existed separately, apart from the *Acts of Thomas*. But within the *Acts of Thomas*, a reasonable interpretation is that the prince represents the soul of each human being.
- » Just as the prince originates in a splendid palace in a faraway place, so too our soul originates in the spiritual realm. The soul has been sent into this cosmos to gain knowledge and salvation. This is not our true home, however, and we should, like the prince, be wary of the impurities that this realm offers. The dragon Satan wants to prevent us from gaining the salvation that the pearl represents.
- » Like the prince, we have tasted the local food—that is, we have involved ourselves in the pleasures of sex, food, and wealth—and we have forgotten who we really are. We have clothed ourselves like residents of this world. Jesus is like the message of God: He has come to rescue us from the dragon, show us who we really are and where we're really from, and guide us back to our eternal home.

LECTURE 20

Spiritual Love in the *Acts of Andrew*

The *Acts of Andrew* is an apocryphal work that survives only in fragments. The surviving text indicates that the book was probably not the most profound of early Christian writings, nor would it have shed light on some lost branch of the early Christian movement. The *Acts of Andrew* is notable, however, for containing some of the most bizarre stories in all of early Christian literature.



Sculpture of the apostle Andrew

Cannibals and Floods

.....

- » The *Acts of Andrew* is the most poorly preserved of all the early apocryphal apostolic acts. We can't be 100 percent certain that any of the remains that we have actually go back to the original text, which was probably written in the 3rd century. Most scholars, however, do think that we can figure out what was in the text.
- » The most complete witness we have comes from Gregory, the bishop of Tours during the late 500s. Around 593, Gregory composed in Latin a work entitled *Book of the Miracles of Blessed Andrew the Apostle*. Gregory tells us that he used for his book the earlier *Acts of Andrew*, retaining all the miracle stories and omitting Andrew's speeches and prayers. Gregory also says that he corrected things that he found theologically offensive.
- » The result is still a long text, with one miracle story after another. It's either fast-moving and action-packed or tedious and repetitive, depending on how much you enjoy stories about exorcisms, resurrections, incestuous mothers, and so on. Some fragments of a Coptic translation of the original Greek *Acts of Andrew* overlap with Gregory's text, so we can be pretty sure that he did indeed use the original *Acts of Andrew* in making his book.
- » Additional sources for the original *Acts of Andrew* include a number of manuscripts in Greek, Latin, and other languages. These manuscripts give us what's called the *Acts of Andrew and Matthias in the City of the Cannibals*. Most scholars believe that this story was originally part of the *Acts of Andrew* and then was spun off and circulated separately.
- » As the story goes, when the apostles cast lots to see who will go where, Matthias ends up with Myrmidonia, the city of the cannibals.

When Matthias is captured, Jesus sends Andrew to rescue him. Andrew sets Matthias free, but the cannibals then capture Andrew. They torture him by dragging him around the city for three days, ripping off his skin and causing him to bleed profusely. Eventually Jesus saves Andrew, and the apostle causes a flood that fills the city with water. The cannibals repent, and Andrew stops the flooding.

- » The author seems to have taken the ancient legend of the Myrmidons and Christianized it to create this tale. Other aspects of the story may have been drawn from Homer's *Odyssey*. The story does have a religious message—Jesus saves his followers even from cannibals—but it may primarily be an attempt to remake some traditional ancient stories with Christian characters.

Love and Sex

.....

- » The most important part of the *Acts of Andrew* is the story of Maximilla, Aegeates, and the execution of Andrew. This story is preserved in manuscript copies written in Greek, Latin, and Armenian.
- » Maximilla, a wealthy, prominent woman, hears the preaching of the apostle Andrew. Afterward, she converts to Christianity and stops having sex with her husband, Aegeates. Aegeates does not like this situation at all, and he attacks the apostle, who is the cause of his marital discord. As in other apocryphal acts, the conflict between the apostle and the aggrieved husband results in the apostle's martyrdom.
- » Love and sex become important themes throughout this drama. Maximilla tells her husband, "I am in love, Aegeates; I am in love, but the object of my love is not of this world, and therefore it is

imperceptible to you. Night and day it kindles and enflames me with love for it.... So then let me have intercourse with and take my rest with it alone.”

- » The use of erotic language in the *Acts of Andrew* shows that the author is greatly indebted to the philosophy of Plato. Plato placed eros—love or desire—at the center of how a person comes to know and have a relationship with God. Plato understood that erotic desire for the beautiful is one of the most powerful forces in the human soul. He argued that we should learn to ascend from loving the beautiful bodies of other people, to loving the beauties of wisdom and learning, to loving Beauty itself—that is, God.
- » During the 2nd and 3rd centuries, philosophers indebted to Plato—Christians and non-Christians alike—became less positive about sexual love. Some advocated that the truly philosophical person not just learn to desire and love God, but also give up sexual love and become celibate, something Plato did not advocate.
- » The *Acts of Andrew* participates in this philosophical trend. It suggests that the truly philosophical person will give up sexual love and instead learn to love only God. The bond between Andrew and Maximilla becomes a symbol or allegory for the love between the human soul and the divine Spirit. Aegeates, Maximilla’s husband, represents the flesh and the material world, things that drag the soul away from its one true love.
- » The author invites the reader to look for this higher, symbolic meaning. At the end of the book, the author calls the stories he has told “blessed tales, acts, and mysteries that are difficult—or should I say, impossible—to express.” He has recorded what he calls “both the

obvious and also the obscure, comprehensible only to the intellect.” In other words, parts of the text have a higher, hidden meaning, which the reader needs to seek out with his or her intellect.

Men and Women

.....

- » The basic celibacy plot appears in nearly all the apocryphal acts. A woman hears the message of a Christian apostle and gives up sex with her husband. The jilted husband is usually a powerful political man—a king, a Roman proconsul, a friend of the emperor—so he can get the apostle executed. The apostle’s message not only disrupts a marriage; it also seems to threaten the city or the empire.
- » Scholars have interpreted this political edge in two ways. Some scholars emphasize that the people who choose celibacy and make everyone else angry are almost all women. Women separate from their husbands, and they stick to their new Christian commitment despite many threats and dangers. Given the patriarchal nature of marriage in the ancient world, these female characters seem to be exercising an autonomy, an independence of thought and action, that threatens their husbands and the entire structure of society.
- » Some scholars even argued that the authors of the apocryphal acts may have been women—or that women originally told the stories about rebellious wives that ended up in the apocryphal acts. From this perspective, the apocryphal acts provide precious evidence for how Christianity could offer ancient women a way of life that was less constricting than traditional marriage and family.
- » Other scholars dispute that these stories are really about women achieving independence. Instead, they emphasize that it’s actually the apostle who challenges the structures and values of society,

and it's he who pays the price with death. In this case, the real story is the conflict between the Christian apostle and the pagan civic leader. The acts present the apostles as better leaders than contemporary politicians. The apostle does not take people's money; he heals their diseases and casts out their demons; and he calls them to a life of righteousness in Christ.

- » In this view, the wife who chooses the apostle over her husband represents what all people should do. The woman's decision to abandon sex with her husband and follow the Christian apostle indicates how much worthier a leader the Christian apostle is. These stories are not so much about the liberation of women as they are about the superiority of Christianity and its male leaders to traditional pagan society and its male leaders. Gender does play an important role—the response of a female to two males is key—but in the end, it's all about men.
- » These two different perspectives on the political meaning of these stories reflect how women and gender have been studied in the academy for the last several decades. During the 1970s and 1980s, historians were eager to learn more about ancient women, and they readily identified sources like the apocryphal acts as evidence for what real women were doing. But in the 1990s, historians became more pessimistic about such sources and about the possibility of using them to find out about real ancient women. Educated men wrote these texts, after all, and their interests appear to have been in themselves, not in women.

LECTURE 21

Forged Letters of Jesus and the Apostles

The quintessential form of Christian literature is the letter. The earliest surviving Christian text is a letter of Paul, and of the 27 writings in the New Testament, 21 are or claim to be letters. It should come as no surprise, then, that some early Christians forged letters in the names of prominent apostles. These letters are an important part of the apocryphal New Testament.



Making the Cut

.....

- » As with apocryphal gospels and apocryphal acts of the apostles, the standard definition of apocryphal letters includes only letters that have to do with people and characters in the New Testament—specifically, letters that claim to be written by or to New Testament figures such as Jesus, the apostles, and Pontius Pilate. This definition leaves out a lot of very early Christian letters.
- » For example, in the 90s a Christian community in Rome sent a letter to fellow Christians in Corinth. The church official who wrote on behalf of the Romans was named Clement, so the letter is now known as 1 Clement. Even though 1 Clement is a very ancient letter, older even than some texts in the New Testament, it was not included in the New Testament canon. It's not considered apocryphal, however, because it doesn't claim to be from or to any New Testament figures.
- » Likewise, in the 110s a Christian leader from Antioch named Ignatius wrote a series of letters to multiple churches as he was being transported to Rome for trial and likely execution. Ignatius knew the letters of Paul and consciously modeled his own letters on them. Like 1 Clement, the letters of Ignatius enjoyed authority among early Christians, but they weren't included in the New Testament, nor are they considered apocryphal.
- » The texts that do fit the definition of apocryphal letters are all forgeries—letters that claim to be written by or to New Testament figures, but aren't. However, not all such forged letters are apocryphal, because there are forged letters in the New Testament. Ancient Christians wrongly thought that they were genuine, so they are in the canon.

Jesus Writes to Abgar

- » Only once in the New Testament is Jesus depicted as writing anything, and that instance involved Jesus writing something in the dirt. Otherwise, no New Testament author suggests that Jesus wrote anything, and today historians debate whether the historical Jesus would have been able to write.
- » Around the year 300, however, the Christian historian and bishop Eusebius reports that he found two short but precious letters in the archives of a church in Edessa, Syria. The letters were in Syriac, but Eusebius translated them into Greek.
- » In one letter, the 1st-century king of Edessa, Abgar the Black, writes to Jesus and tells him that he has heard of all the amazing miracles that Jesus has performed. Abgar says, “I have concluded one of two



things: either you are God and do these things having descended from heaven, or you do them as the Son of God.” Abgar then requests that Jesus come to Edessa and cure him of his own illness.

» Jesus’s response to Abgar reads in full:

✧ Blessed are you who have believed in me without seeing me. For it is written about me that those who see me will not believe in me, and that those who do not see me will believe and live. But concerning your request that I come to you, I must accomplish everything I was sent here to do, and after accomplishing them I must ascend to the One who sent me. After I have ascended I will send you one of my disciples to heal your illness and to provide life both to you and to those who are with you.

» There’s no doubt that these letters really did exist in Edessa where Eusebius reported that he found them. They were not authentic, however; they were probably forged in the late 3rd century. Nevertheless, they were revered by the people of the city.

Apocryphal Letters of Paul

.....

» Apocryphal letters from apostles did not have the same divine force as a letter from Jesus, but they could be powerful ways of asserting one’s theological views. We see this in the apocryphal letters that claim to come from Paul. There are three relevant texts or set of texts: a letter from Paul called *3 Corinthians*, a letter from Paul to the Laodiceans, and finally a set of letters written by Paul and the Roman philosopher Seneca to each other.

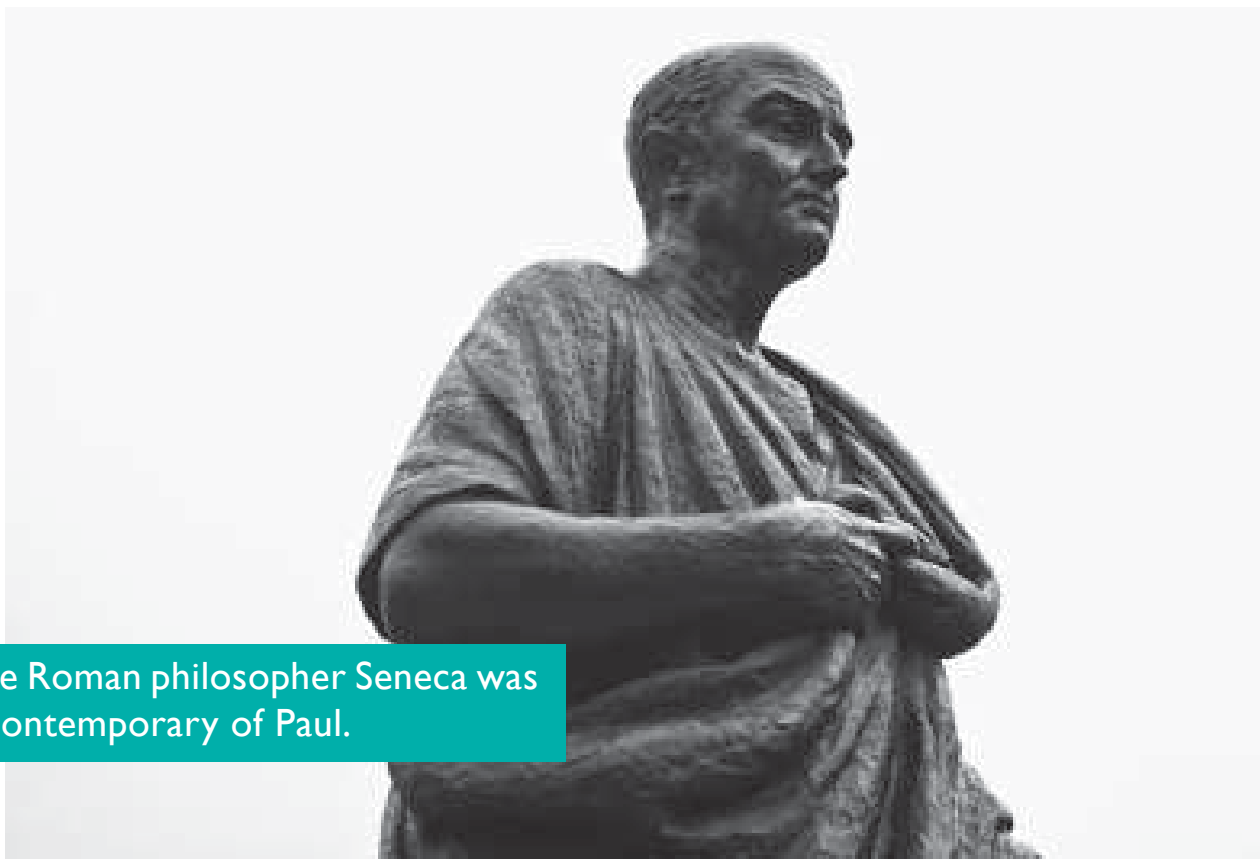
» The least interesting of these is the *Epistle to the Laodiceans*. An anonymous text called the Muratorian Canon from around

the year 200 warns against a false epistle of Paul to the Christians in Laodicea, saying that it was forged by followers of Marcion, a notorious heretic of the 2nd century. But the *Epistle to the Laodiceans* that we have contains no ideas that are distinctive of what Marcion taught. In fact, it has no distinct ideas at all; it's just a bunch of words, phrases, and sentences from other letters of Paul.

- » This is not the case with *3 Corinthians*, which has a very specific theological agenda. This false letter was written sometime during the 2nd century. It was incorporated into the *Acts of Paul*, which we know was composed sometime before the year 200. But it also circulated separately, and many Christians accepted it as authentic. In fact, Christians in Syria and Armenia included it in their New Testaments for centuries.
- » Like the genuine *1 Corinthians* in the New Testament, *3 Corinthians* responds to a letter from the Corinthians to Paul, but for *3 Corinthians* we have the purported letter. In it, the Corinthians tell Paul that two Christian teachers, Simon and Cleobius, have come and upset some of the believers with what they call “corrupt teachings.” Specifically, Simon and Cleobius say that Christians need not bother reading the Old Testament; that the God of the Old Testament is not the highest God or the creator of the world; and that Jesus was not really born of Mary, nor did he have real human flesh, nor will the flesh rise again in the resurrection.
- » All these ideas circulated among Christians of the 2nd century and represent the views of so-called heretics like Marcion, the Gnostics, the Valentinians, Docetists, and others. Orthodox Christians opposed these ideas, and so too did whoever composed *3 Corinthians*. The author of *3 Corinthians* uses Paul to refute all these ideas, but he particularly

attacks the claim that the resurrected body will not have flesh. No, the author says, Jesus's own flesh was raised from the dead, and so too Christians will be raised with their flesh intact at the end of time.

- » What's ironic is that it's not at all clear that Paul himself believed that there would be a resurrection of the flesh. In 1 Corinthians, Paul explains that resurrected Christians will have "spiritual bodies," not bodies of flesh. Paul states categorically, "Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God." Instead, he says, "We will all be changed." So in the case of 3 *Corinthians*, someone impersonated Paul to attack Christian ideas he considered heretical, but in doing so he advocated for a view that Paul himself opposed.
- » The final apocryphal letters of Paul are part of a set of letters that purport to be written between Paul and the great Roman philosopher Seneca. Seneca was indeed an exact contemporary of Paul. Seneca was a mentor to the young Nero and later Nero's close advisor when he became emperor. Seneca wrote important works of Stoic philosophy as well as dramatic tragedies, and he is remembered as one of the great writers of Latin.
- » The forged exchanges between Paul and Seneca come from the 4th century, some 300 years after Paul and Seneca lived. By this time, the Roman emperors had become Christians and supported the Christian church. Conversions to Christianity were taking place at an accelerating rate, and more and more new Christians were wealthy, highly educated people. It became acceptable and even politically advantageous to give up traditional paganism and embrace Christianity.
- » In this context, one reason for someone to create letters between Paul and Seneca might be to show how Christianity relates to paganism



The Roman philosopher Seneca was a contemporary of Paul.

or Stoic philosophy. All those new Christians may still have needed to be persuaded that their new religion was superior to or built upon the traditions that they had left behind. Having Seneca write to Paul and say how great his teachings were might help with that. But the letters between Paul and Seneca have practically no theological or philosophical substance to them, so that doesn't seem to be the point.

- » Instead, what the letters do talk about is literature. Seneca shares with Paul his own literary activities, and he praises Paul's letter as "admirable," "lofty," and "brilliant." Seneca tells Paul that he read some of his letters out loud to Nero, and the emperor was amazed that someone with so little education could write so well. Seneca proceeds to give Paul writing tips, sending him a handbook on elegance of expression.
- » It seems that the underlying concern with Paul's letters is that they aren't really great literature. Like the rest of the New Testament, Paul's letters aren't elegantly written by classical standards. The author of

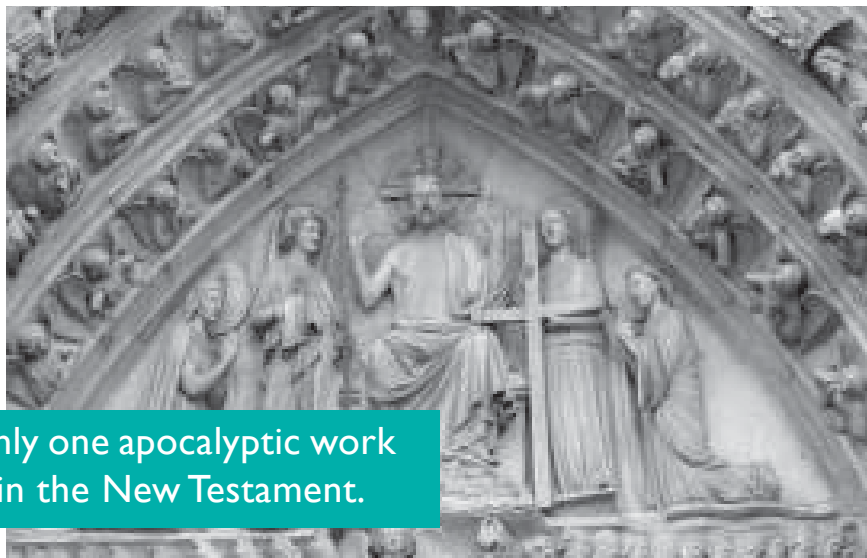
the letters between Paul and Seneca wasn't alone in his anxiety on this issue. Even the great St. Augustine reports that he put off embracing Christianity because he found the scriptures crude and uninspiring next to Virgil, Cicero, and other great authors.

- » Rather than undermining Paul's work, the effect of Seneca's compliments and suggestions is to endorse its quality. In the apocryphal letters between Paul and Seneca, Paul takes his place among the great authors of the Roman tradition. His letters may not be as elegantly written as the works of Seneca, but even Seneca himself appreciates their brilliance. This fake Seneca could reassure new, well-educated Christians that their new classics, Paul and the Gospels, were as good as their old classics.
- » We can't be sure whether the people who forged the apocryphal letters really expected that people would believe them. Most of them probably hoped so, but it seems likely that the author of the letters of Seneca and Paul, at least, was engaging in something like literary fiction—fun to read, but not necessarily something to be taken entirely seriously. What we do know for sure is that some ancient and medieval Christian scribes considered these apocryphal letters worth copying.

LECTURE 22

Revelations That Didn't Make the Bible

An apocalypse is a book that claims to record a revelation from God, often featuring bizarre symbolic visions that claim to explain past, current, and future events. Several works of this type were composed by early Christians, but only one—the Revelation to John—became part of the New Testament. This lecture examines other apocalypses, including a couple that nearly became part of the canon. All these texts claim to present visionary revelations from God, but they differ widely in their contents and theology.



Only one apocalyptic work is in the New Testament.

Surviving Manuscripts

.....

- » The Muratorian Canon is a fragmentary text that we believe comes from around the year 200. It discusses which Christian texts should be read in church meetings—that is, it lists an embryonic New Testament. The author says, “We receive only the apocalypses of John and Peter, although some of us are not willing that the latter be read in church.”
- » No fewer than three apocalypses attributed to Peter survive today. One is rather late, written perhaps in the 8th or 9th century by Christians living under Muslim rule. It survives in Arabic and is also called the *Book of the Rolls*. This cannot be the apocalypse of Peter that our early Christian author accepted.
- » The second candidate survives in only one manuscript in Coptic. It was found at Nag Hammadi in Egypt in 1945, and scholars often call it the *Coptic Apocalypse of Peter* (a misnomer, as it was undoubtedly composed in Greek). This work may have been composed in the late 2nd century or 3rd century, so it could have been known to the author of the Muratorian Canon. But it is almost certainly not the apocalypse that the author accepted, because it teaches a theology that the author would have considered heretical.
- » The *Apocalypse of Peter* accepted by our author as biblical must be one that survives completely only in an Ethiopic translation of the original Greek. This apocalypse was known to other Christian authors of the 2nd century, so it must have been written fairly early. It describes a vision that Peter has of both heaven and hell, in which he sees the various punishments that the damned suffer.

- » Around 200, one Christian community accepted this *Apocalypse of Peter* as canonical, although some thought it should not be read in church. A little over a century later, however, the Christian scholar Eusebius of Caesarea called the book “spurious.” Eusebius considered its theology acceptable, but he did not believe that the apostle Peter wrote it. This opinion eventually prevailed, and the *Apocalypse of Peter* did not make it into the New Testament.
- » After discussing the apocalypses of John and Peter, the author of the Muratorian Canon turns to a work called the *Shepherd of Hermas*. In this apocalypse, divine revealer figures appear to a Christian named Hermas; they show him visions, give him commandments, and tell him parables.
- » The *Shepherd of Hermas* was hugely popular among ancient Christians, especially in Egypt. Numerous Christian authors cite it as scripture, and it appears in one of the oldest surviving manuscripts of the New Testament. Its teaching is fairly orthodox for its time.
- » Nonetheless, the author of the Muratorian Canon did not include the *Shepherd of Hermas* in his embryonic New Testament because it was written, as he puts it, “very recently, in our times.” Eusebius likewise rejected the text as “spurious” in the early 300s.
- » There are also two works that purport to be apocalypses of the apostle Paul. The first, found at Nag Hammadi in 1945, survives only in Coptic. It was composed originally in Greek, and it may have been composed as early as the 2nd century. In this work, Paul ascends through the heavenly spheres above the earth. The second, which is far more famous and influential, was composed around 390. Inspired by one of the apocalypses of Peter, this *Apocalypse of Paul* has Paul not only travel to heaven but also see the torments of the damned in hell.

The *Shepherd of Hermas*

.....

- » From the opening scene of the *Shepherd of Hermas*, we learn that Hermas was once a slave belonging to the Roman lady Rhoda. At some point he was freed, however, and he later formed a new relationship with Rhoda. The text indicates that Hermas and Rhoda likely were both Christians.
- » At one point, Hermas sees Rhoda bathing naked in the Tiber River. Hermas thinks about how great it would be to have such a fine woman as his wife, but he insists that he had no other lustful thoughts. This proves to be a good introduction to a major theme of the *Shepherd of Hermas*—repentance—because it turns out that Hermas did have some impure thoughts about Rhoda.
- » Repentance recurs frequently in the visions and teachings of the *Shepherd of Hermas*. Repentance was also a topic that divided Christians during the 2nd and 3rd centuries. Some Christian teachers argued that, if someone returns to sinning after repenting, converting to Christianity, and being baptized, he or she cannot return to the church. Such teachers probably cited from the New Testament Epistle to the Hebrews, which states in chapter 6:

It is impossible to restore again to repentance those who have once been enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, since on their own they are crucifying again the Son of God and are holding him up to contempt.

- » Based on this passage, some early Christians argued that after baptism a Christian must lead a life of holiness. If a Christian turned back to a life of sin, then he or she could not be restored to the Christian community. God, they argued, has not authorized the church to grant such new forgiveness.
- » This is the teaching that Hermas presents to the shepherd, one of the text's divine revealer figures. At first the shepherd agrees with this, but he goes on to say that a Christian may have one more opportunity to repent should he or she fall to Satan's temptation. Repentance and forgiveness, sometimes only once but usually more often, became the practice of orthodox Christians, and indeed the *Shepherd of Hermas* became a favorite text of Christian leaders.



Repentance and forgiveness became the cornerstones of Orthodox Christianity.

The *Coptic Apocalypse of Peter*

.....

- » The *Coptic Apocalypse of Peter* presents a special revelation from Christ to Peter that allegedly took place in the days before his crucifixion. Christ uses his revelation to criticize church leaders who call themselves bishops and deacons. They have no authority from God, he says, and they teach heresy. The church they lead is not the true brotherhood of God's little ones. Instead, it's a mere imitation, a sisterhood.
- » Christ singles out one church leader for special criticism. Hermas, he says, is "the firstborn of unrighteousness." He leads the true little ones away from the light and into the darkness.
- » Hermas and the heretical bishops and deacons, Christ says, worship "a dead man." The *Coptic Apocalypse of Peter* argues that the real savior was not crucified. Peter has a vision in which he sees Jesus being crucified, but he sees a second figure nearby smiling and laughing. The Savior explains that the figure dying on the cross is not the real Jesus—he's not "the living Jesus," but only the fleshly part of him, a substitute.
- » Peter then sees yet another divine figure, someone who looks like the living Jesus, but who is clothed with the Holy Spirit, surrounded by a bright light, and praised by a multitude of angels. This, it turns out, is the real Savior, who merely revealed himself in the living Jesus. Even the living Jesus is not the real savior, but the "bodiless body" in which the Savior appeared.
- » The author of the *Apocalypse of Peter* and his community believed that, because he is divine, the true Savior could not have died on the cross. These Christians took an entirely spiritual approach to

human beings and their salvation. We're not really our bodies, they believed, and Christ did not really die in the body. This view is one version of Docetism, the idea that Jesus wasn't really a human being. Here the body that Jesus had was real, and it really died. But the real Jesus, the living Jesus, was not that body.

- » Most Christians did not share this view. They believed that Jesus really did die on the cross and rise again, just as we will die in our bodies and rise again at the end of time. Orthodox Christians rejected adherents of the more spiritual or Docetic view as heretics. In the *Apocalypse of Peter*, the author turns the tables, claiming that the orthodox Christians are the heretics.

The *Coptic Apocalypse of Paul*

.....

- » Like the *Coptic Apocalypse of Peter*, the *Coptic Apocalypse of Paul* presents some unorthodox ideas. The *Coptic Apocalypse of Paul*, however, presents its ideas in a much less aggressive way.
- » In the New Testament, Paul himself claims to have had revelations from Christ. He turned away from persecuting Christians and became an apostle when Jesus appeared to him. And in 2 Corinthians, he told his disciples that he once had been transported to “the third heaven,” where he heard things that no human being is allowed to repeat.
- » The *Coptic Apocalypse of Paul* builds on this by having Paul travel all the way up to the tenth heaven. In this apocalypse, Paul's journey begins at the third heaven, which we know from the New Testament he had already visited, and goes all the way to the tenth heaven. Along the way, Paul interacts with various spirits and angels, some of which try to prevent him from ascending further.

- » In the fourth heaven, Paul sees what happens to souls when people die. When Paul arrives, he finds that angels are flogging a soul. The soul asks what it did to deserve such treatment. The gatekeeper replies that the soul committed “lawless actions” on the earth, which the gatekeeper calls “the world of the dead.” The soul demands that witnesses appear and testify to what it had done. Three souls come forward and testify that the soul in question had committed various sins, including murder. The soul looks dejected, and it is sent back into the world and put into a new body.
- » Paul learns that, when people die, their souls ascend to the fourth heaven. If they have sinned in serious ways, they are punished and sent back to live again in this world. It seems that this process could be repeated until the person lives a good life and his or her soul can ascend higher after death. In this scheme, an everlasting hell may not be necessary. Belief in reincarnation was not unknown among early Christians, but it was not at all mainstream.
- » In the seventh heaven, Paul meets an old man dressed in white and sitting on a throne. It turns out that the old man is the god who created our universe, the God of the Old Testament. He’s clearly not the highest and most important God. When you die, if your soul gets past the judgment at the fourth heaven, it will need to know the right things to say to the Old Testament God in the seventh heaven to ascend further. These ideas were typical of Gnostics, Valentinians, and other so-called heretics of the 2nd and 3rd centuries.

LECTURE 23

Tours of Hell before Dante

In the *Apocalypse of Peter*, Christ himself shows Peter a vision of what hell will be like. Specific sinners are named, and they suffer torments that fit their crimes. This revelation was later supplanted by a more elaborate, updated vision of hell called the *Apocalypse of Paul*, which influenced the Christian imagination throughout the Middle Ages, including that of the great Dante.



Apocryphal works influenced later Christian authors, such as Dante.

New Testament Views

.....

- » The New Testament does not present a single consistent picture of the afterlife in general or of hell in particular. Regarding hell, most passages speak vaguely of “weeping and gnashing of teeth” or of “punishment,” while Revelation has sinners being cast into a lake of fire. There’s not much detail.
- » The authors of the New Testament also do not present consistent views as to when people will go to heaven or hell. In some passages of the Gospels, the letters of Paul, and Revelation, and the gospels, people’s bodies are buried and their souls fall asleep. Only when Jesus returns at some future time and brings this world to an end will people be raised from the dead, receive judgment, and get assigned to heaven or hell. The sinners will be cast into hell, and the righteous will enter the kingdom of God here on a transformed earth.
- » Other passages in the New Testament suggest that people go to heaven or hell right away, at their death. Heaven is a wonderful place that is apparently not on this earth. In the Gospel of Luke, as Jesus is dying on the cross, he tells one of the thieves crucified with him, “Today you will be with me in paradise.” In a parable also recounted in Luke, a poor man named Lazarus dies and goes directly to live with the patriarch Abraham, while a rich man dies and goes immediately to Hades, where he’s tortured. Even Paul, who refers to dead people as “sleeping,” says that, if he were to die, he would be “with Christ.”
- » The numerous inconsistencies in the New Testament’s presentation of the afterlife have given later Christian authors plenty of room to imagine precisely what happens to people’s souls and bodies when they die and what heaven and hell might be like.

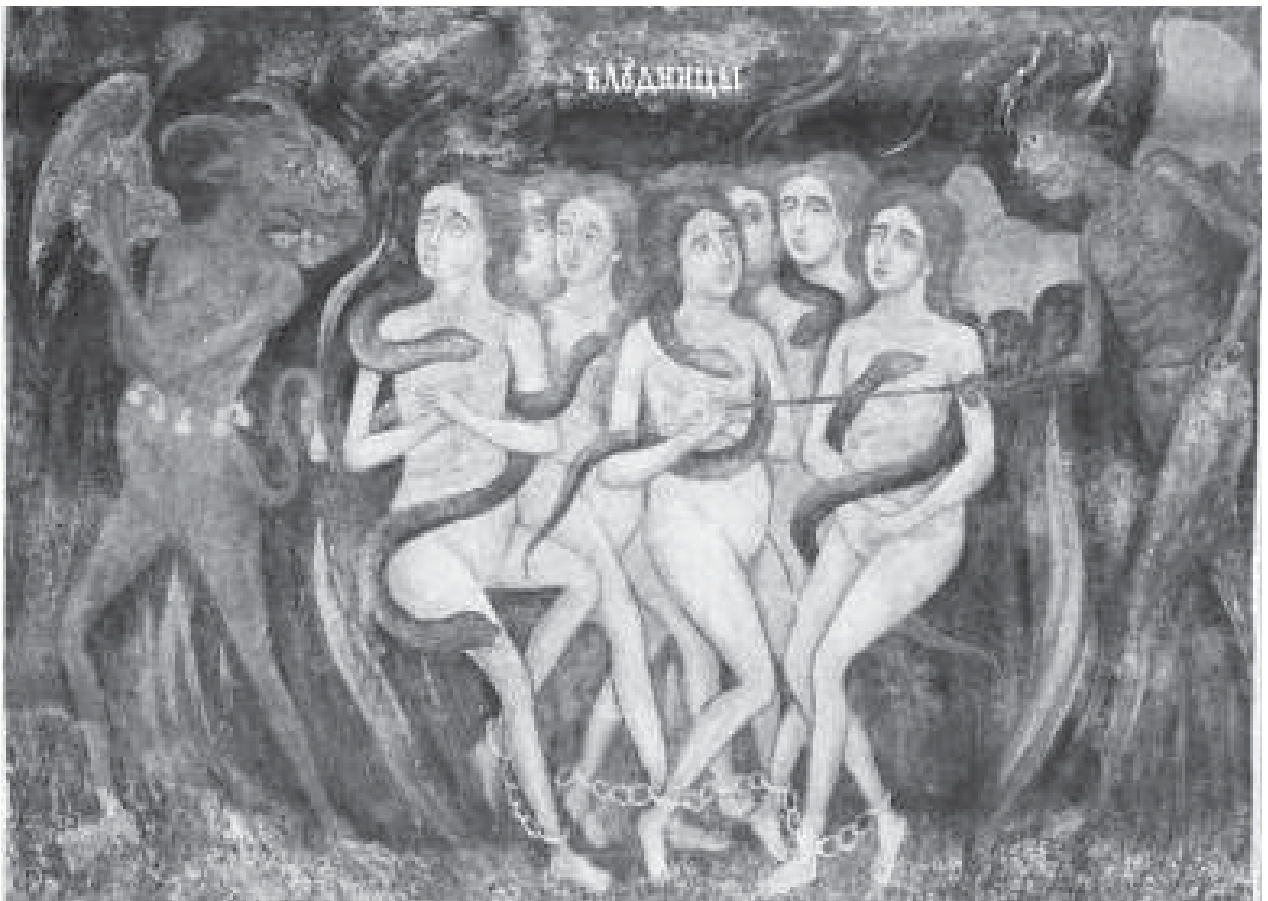
The Apocalypse of Peter

.....

- » The *Apocalypse of Peter* is one of three apocalypses attributed to Peter from ancient and medieval Christianity. One comes from much later, the 9th or 10th century, and concerns Christians living under Muslim rule. Another, the *Coptic Apocalypse of Peter*, has Christ appearing to Peter and revealing teachings that are somewhat unorthodox.
- » The *Apocalypse of Peter* nearly made it into the New Testament. One early Christian author around the year 200 wrote that his community accepted the *Apocalypse of Peter* as scripture, but that some thought it should not be read in church meetings. About the same time, the Christian scholar Clement of Alexandria cited the apocalypse twice, both times positively. By the 300s, however, most Christians had decided that the apostle Peter was not the real author of this book, and it was not included in the New Testament.
- » Despite its early popularity, only fragments of a Greek text survive. The full and complete *Apocalypse of Peter* exists today only in an Ethiopic translation. Scholars can tell, however, that the Ethiopic is close to the original Greek, closer even than the later Greek fragments.
- » Ancient apocalypses present revelations from God to a human figure. Most often these revelations take the form of visions, although sometimes the revealer simply delivers new teachings. Both of these things happen in the *Apocalypse of Peter*, but the emphasis is on visions.
- » The story takes place at an indeterminate time when Jesus is seated with his disciples on the Mount of Olives outside Jerusalem. The disciples ask Jesus about the future end times. Jesus holds up his right hand, and there, in the palm of Jesus's raised hand, Peter and perhaps also the other disciples see what will happen to the sinners

and the righteous at the end of time. People will be raised from the dead, and their souls will be reunited with their bodies. God will even command that animals and birds of prey regurgitate all the flesh that they have devoured, so that not a single body will be lost.

- » At the judgment all people will have to walk through a river of fire. This is a fire of testing. The elect, who have done good, will pass through the fire unharmed and approach Jesus. But the sinners will suffer in the fire, and their evil works will be revealed. Angels will then prepare places for each sinner to be punished in accordance with his sins.
- » Next come descriptions of how various sinners are tortured. Most of them have some sort of punishment that fits their crime. Blasphemers, for example, hang by their tongues over unquenchable fire. The sins that are listed divide into two broad categories: general immorality and sins specific to non-Christians.



General immorality includes sins such as adultery, murder, child abandonment, and disobedience. Sins specific to non-Christians include idolatry and persecution of Christians.

- » After the lengthy vision of hell, Christ says only briefly that the righteous will go to a lovely field of flowers and enjoy many good things. Hell really is the focus of the revelation. The apocalypse ends with a glorious vision of Christ, accompanied by Moses and the prophet Elijah.
- » It's hard to know how many non-Christians would have been exposed to the *Apocalypse of Peter*: It was a book for Christians, and even some of them thought it was too intense to read in church in front of everybody. But there are some early Christian writings, including the *Acts of Thomas*, in which visions of hell are used as a missionary strategy.

The *Apocalypse of Paul*

.....

- » The *Apocalypse of Paul* must be distinguished from an earlier apocalypse that survives in a Coptic translation found at Nag Hammadi in Egypt in 1945. That apocalypse was probably written in the late 2nd or 3rd century, and it describes Paul ascending through the heavens above the earth.
- » The text of the *Apocalypse of Paul* has a preface that explains how it was discovered. The author tells us that a nobleman was living in Tarsus, Paul's hometown, in the very house that Paul used to live in. An angel appeared to the nobleman and told him to dig up the foundation of the house and publish what he would find there. What he found was a marble box, with an inscription saying that it

contained the manuscript of the *Apocalypse of Paul* and the shoes that Paul wore on his missionary journeys.

- » Rather than opening the box himself, the nobleman turned it over to the local government, and it was sent to the emperor, Theodosius. The emperor opened it and discovered the manuscript. He had a copy sent to Jerusalem, and he kept the original. All this, we are told, took place during the consulship of Theodosius and Cynegius, which was in 388. This discovery story explains why an apocalypse written by the apostle Paul, who died in the 50s of the 1st century, did not appear until more than 300 years later.
- » Of course, historians do not believe this discovery story. Instead, they conclude that the text itself was written in 388 or shortly thereafter. By this time, the emperor Theodosius had made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire. By the late 380s, Christian bishops had gathered in multiple church councils all over the empire to organize church offices, standardize practices in worship and discipline, and decide on orthodox doctrines. The *Apocalypse of Paul* reflects these developments.
- » The apocalypse claims to have been written by Paul himself, and indeed the apostle speaks in the first person. In 2 Corinthians in the New Testament, Paul refers cryptically to an experience in which he was snatched up to the third heaven and heard things that should not be spoken of by humans. Paul claims not to be sure whether he had this experience in his body or outside it. The *Apocalypse of Paul* presents itself as Paul telling what he saw and heard during his experience in the third heaven—except, of course, for those things that a human being is not allowed to tell.

- » Among other things, Paul learns that every human being has a guardian angel who accompanies him or her. Every night, these angels gather in heaven to worship God, and they report on what their human beings did during the day. These angels also play an important role in our judgment.
- » According to the *Apocalypse of Paul*, a person's soul is judged immediately after the person dies and is assigned to either heaven or hell. The *Apocalypse of Peter* held out the possibility that some souls might be able to repent after death and before the last judgment. In the *Apocalypse of Paul*, the time to repent is now.
- » Paul witnesses three souls being judged: a clearly righteous soul, a clearly wicked soul, and a soul that claims to be righteous but is exposed as wicked. In each case, the soul's guardian angel and other angels play key roles. For a righteous person, the guardian angel testifies to all the good things that the soul did during its lifetime. For a wicked person, the angel is more like a prosecuting attorney, presenting the case against the accused before God.
- » Interestingly, God says at one point that he would like to hear only the sins of the soul for the last five years before its death. He explicitly says that, if someone repents and gives up evil behavior even shortly before death, then he will overlook everything earlier. The apocalypse emphasizes not only that people must repent, but also that they can do so at any time.
- » Unlike Peter in his apocalypse, Paul gets to see heaven, where the souls of the righteous go. The geography of this paradise is complicated, featuring a large lake and the City of Christ surrounded by rivers of honey, milk, wine, and oil. Exemplars of different virtues inhabit different places in the heavenly terrain. Virtuous married

people enjoy a lovely setting, but even greater comfort is given to monks and virgins.

- » Sinners are sentenced to many of the same punishments found in the *Apocalypse of Peter*. Sins such as idolatry and persecution of Christians are conspicuously absent; the Roman Empire had since become Christian, and these evils were not as pressing as they had been in the 2nd century. In addition to general sins such as sexual immorality, neglect of the poor, and murder, we see the wicked acts of church officials, monks, and heretics.
- » The worst, darkest place in hell is reserved for heretics, where the unsleeping worms gnaw at people forever. The author mentions three heresies in particular: denying that Christ was really born of Mary and took on flesh, denying that the Eucharist really is the body and blood of Christ, and denying that Christ rose from the dead in the flesh and that our flesh will also arise. These were issues that divided some monastic communities in Egypt during the late 4th century.
- » The apocalypse ends on a somewhat hopeful note, as Paul helps the archangel Michael and other angels persuade Christ to give all these suffering people a day off from their torments once a week—on Sunday. We see here the idea that saints like Paul can persuade God to have mercy on sinners after their deaths.
- » It's important to notice that the *Apocalypse of Paul*'s focus is very much on Christians. Outsiders like pagans hardly appear, and Jews are mentioned only briefly. Clearly, hell had changed from the 2nd century and the *Apocalypse of Peter* to the 4th century and the *Apocalypse of Paul*. In the 2nd century, hell was supposed to scare non-Christians and persuade them to convert. By the 4th century, hell was supposed to scare Christians and persuade them to repent.

LECTURE 24

Apocrypha after the New Testament

The earliest known document listing the 27 books of the modern New Testament was composed in the year 367. The fate of apocryphal Christian literature in the centuries that followed is complicated. Christians disagreed about whether they should avoid such books completely or whether they could be useful in some situations. Many apocryphal books continued to influence popular Christian culture, and new books about Jesus, his family, and the apostles continued to be written. Debate over the authority of such works continues to the present day.



The Gutenberg Bible

Defining Apocrypha

.....

- » Some Christians had discussed the idea of a New Testament as early as the late 100s. By the 200s, nearly everybody agreed that it should include the four Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John; the Acts of the Apostles; the letters of Paul; and some other letters attributed to other apostles.
- » The Christians who discussed this issue were uncertain about which apostolic letters were genuine: How many letters did John or Peter really write? And they disagreed about apocalypses: Should the Apocalypse of John be included? The *Apocalypse of Peter* was popular among some Christians, and so was the apocalypse called the *Shepherd of Hermas*.
- » One reason Christians disagreed about the contents of a New Testament is that they were often compiling their lists for different reasons. Some were scholars, trying to figure out which texts they should teach their students or which writings might convey religious insight. But others were bishops or other clergy members who were deciding what books could be read in church as sacred scripture.
- » Eusebius of Caesarea was a bishop and scholar who lived in the early 300s. He tried to list the books of the New Testament by reading through the writings of earlier Christian authors whom he admired and seeing what Christian writings they used. Eusebius ended up with four categories of books:
 - ❑ In the first category were books that Eusebius called “recognized”—books that everybody seemed to consider scriptural. They included the four Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John; the Acts of

the Apostles; the letters of Paul; and the letters known as 1 Peter and 1 John.

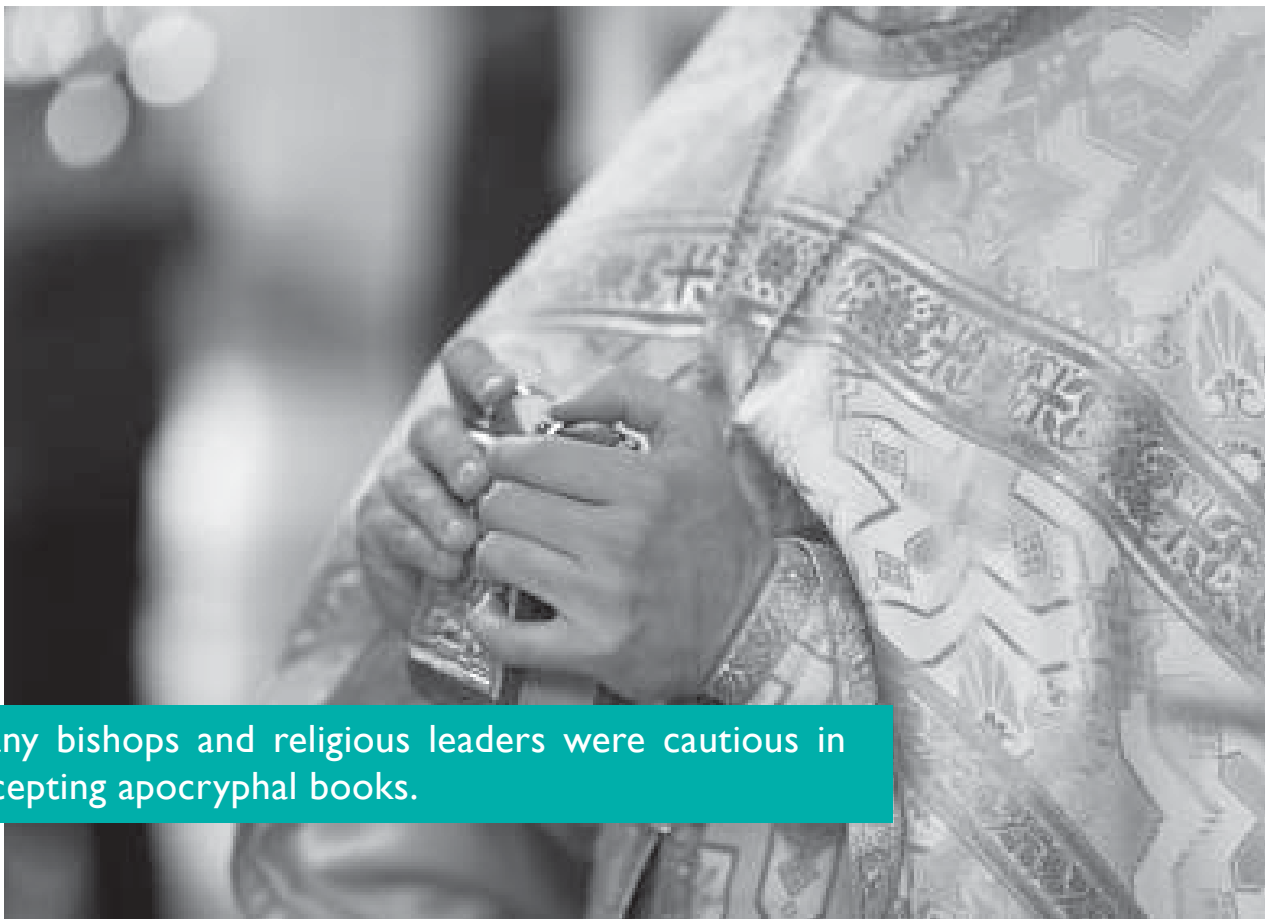
- ❏ In the second category were books that Eusebius called “disputed”—most people seemed to use them, but not everybody. These included James, Jude, 2 Peter, and 2 and 3 John.
- ❏ In the third category were “spurious” books. Eusebius didn’t think these books were dangerous, but they weren’t necessarily authentic writings of apostles. These included the *Acts of Paul*, the *Apocalypse of Peter*, and the *Shepherd of Hermas*.
- ❏ In the fourth category were books that were “impious”—books written by heretics. These included the *Gospel of Thomas*, the *Gospel of Peter*, the *Acts of Andrew*, and the *Acts of John*.

» We can see the criteria that Eusebius used to assess whether writings should be in the New Testament. First, they should be apostolic—either written by an apostle or written during the time of the apostles by someone connected to them. Second, books of the New Testament should be widely used, not just cited or read by Christians in one city or during one period of time. Finally, the books should be orthodox, teaching correct doctrine—correct according to Eusebius, of course.

» When Athanasius, the bishop of Alexandria, made his list of New Testament books in 367, he argued that there were no secret books written by Old Testament figures like Moses or Isaiah, contrary to the claims of some Christians. Athanasius said that all such books were forgeries, composed by heretics recently and passed off as ancient. Athanasius did not mention any apocryphal books attributed to New Testament figures, but he probably would have denied the validity of

those as well. Athanasius condemned completely the reading of any books claiming to be secret writings composed by ancient authors.

- » Less than 20 years later, another Christian bishop, Priscillian of Avila, wrote a short treatise saying that it was acceptable for a Christian teacher to read and use apocryphal books. Priscillian argued that the trained and orthodox Christian scholar can use apocrypha wisely, finding the good in them and leaving aside the bad. Priscillian cited examples from within the Bible as precedents for seeking truth about God and Jesus sources outside the Bible.
- » Few other Christians were as positive about apocryphal books as Priscillian, who was executed as a heretic in 387. Most were simply cautious or even ambivalent. Jerome, a prominent scholar and teacher in the late 300s and early 400s, was a major proponent of basing one's teaching and preaching upon the Bible. He advised one young Christian virgin to avoid apocryphal books entirely.



Many bishops and religious leaders were cautious in accepting apocryphal books.

Examining Apocrypha

.....

- » After the 27 books of the New Testament were established, Christians did not unanimously reject all noncanonical books, nor did they agree precisely which books were considered apocryphal. In fact, a single author like Jerome could warn against reading apocryphal books in one situation, and then commend an apocryphal book as valuable for the edification of the church in another.
- » Christians continued to revise and repackage older apocryphal texts. They also continued to compose new ones, even during and after the closing of the New Testament canon. During the late 4th century and into the 5th century, there was a kind of Renaissance of apocryphal writing. But there is a significant difference between the nature of those works and that of apocryphal works that came before.
- » When most of what we call early Christian apocryphal books were written—during the 2nd and 3rd centuries—the authors of those books did not know that they were writing apocryphal or noncanonical books, because the category of “apocrypha” did not yet exist. There was no New Testament. These authors were simply writing new texts that drew upon and expanded upon earlier texts, including those that later became the New Testament.
- » By the late 300s and beyond, however, Christian authors knew that there was a New Testament, and they were consciously writing noncanonical books. The authors of these later apocryphal books turned more to topics that were not covered by the New Testament writings. It’s from this period that we get the primary texts that discuss how the lives of Joseph and the Virgin Mary came to an end, or that tell us more about Pontius Pilate and what happened to him after Jesus’s death and resurrection.



- » Several of these apocryphal texts from late antiquity claim to have been written in the early period and to have been recently discovered. These discovery stories legitimate the apocryphal text and explain why the text is not in the New Testament, even if it really does come from the purported author. These stories also sound a lot like stories from the same period that describe the discovery of relics of long-dead saints.
- » This was also the time when Christians were discovering throughout Judea, Galilee, and the eastern Mediterranean the places where biblical events took place. Mt. Sinai and the burning bush, the cave where Jesus was born near Bethlehem, the school that little Jesus attended in Nazareth, the tomb in which Jesus had been buried, and other holy sites were located, and churches and shrines were built at them.



- » In all of these purported discoveries—of long-lost sacred texts, relics, and places—Christians were creating their history, inventing traditions that built upon and augmented the New Testament. They were bridging the time between the New Testament and their own day. Christianity was now the official religion of the Roman Empire, and Christians needed a tradition and history as full and complete as what the Romans had. They had to invent such a tradition.

Later Apocrypha

.....

- » The creativity that inspired early authors of Christian apocrypha continued through the Middle Ages and into the present. And what we might call apocryphal literature expanded from texts to other kinds of media, including theater and film. In medieval Europe, so-called mystery plays dramatized events from the Bible, and playwrights

often had to augment the sparse biblical text. Some mystery plays even went beyond the canonical texts to act out events that were similar to apocryphal tales from ancient times—for example, the life of Mary Magdalene.

- » The earliest apocryphal literature often filled in gaps in the New Testament writings, supplementing their stories and answering questions that Christians asked but the New Testament didn't answer. But apocryphal texts also retell and augment New Testament stories to make them more relevant to contemporary Christians. In the *Apocalypse of Paul*, Jesus shows church leaders being punished in hell for behaviors that troubled Christians of the 4th century. The *Arabic Apocalypse of Peter* has Jesus encourage Christians not to convert to Islam in the 10th century.
- » This retelling, augmenting, and updating continues even today. Movies like *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *The Passion of the Christ* retell the Jesus story, adding and enhancing characters and changing dialogue, to make the story speak more directly to contemporary culture. Novels such as *The Last Temptation of Christ* by Nikos Kazantzakis and *The Gospel according to Jesus Christ* by Jose Saramago make Jesus respond to modern philosophical questions like atheism and the problem of evil.
- » Ancient Christians did not give us one apocryphal Jesus, but several. And even today, the apocryphal Jesus gets reinvented over and over again—an amazing testimony to the vibrancy of the Christian imagination and the power of the New Testament and its stories.

Bibliography

Aasgaard, Reidar. *The Childhood of Jesus: Decoding the Apocryphal Infancy Gospel of Thomas*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009. Argues that the so-called *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* was written for children.

Attridge, Harold W. *The Acts of Thomas*. Salem, OR: Polebridge Press, 2010. English translation with introduction and notes.

Bauckham, Richard. “The Two Fig Tree Parables in the *Apocalypse of Peter*.” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 104 (1985): 269–87. Uses fig tree parables to date the *Apocalypse of Peter* to the 130s.

Bazzana, Giovanni. “‘Be Good Moneychangers’: The Role of an Agraphon in a Discursive Fight for the Canon of Scriptures.” In *Invention, Rewriting, Usurpation: Discursive Fights over Religious Traditions in Antiquity*, 297–311. Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2012. Shows how a saying that is found outside the canon became a slogan for establishing the canon.

Bowe, Barbara Ellen. “Dancing into the Divine: The Hymn of the Dance in the *Acts of John*.” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 7 (1999): 83–104.

Excellent analysis of the theology and practice behind the Hymn of the Dance in the *Acts of John*.

Brakke, David. "A New Fragment of Athanasius's 39th *Festal Letter*: Heresy, Apocrypha, and the Canon." *Harvard Theological Review* 103 (2010): 47–66. English translation of the first document to list the 27 books of the New Testament.

———. "Canon Formation and Social Conflict in Fourth-Century Egypt: Athanasius of Alexandria's Thirty-Ninth *Festal Letter*." *Harvard Theological Review* 87 (1994): 395–419. Study of the first document to list the 27 books of the New Testament, which also condemns "apocrypha."

———. "Scriptural Practices in Early Christianity: Towards a New History of the New Testament Canon." In *Invention, Rewriting, Usurpation: Discursive Fights over Religious Traditions in Antiquity*, 263–80. Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2012. The diverse ways early Christians used and created scriptures.

Bremmer, Jan N. "Christian Hell: From the *Apocalypse of Peter* to the *Apocalypse of Paul*." *Numen* 56 (2009): 298–325. Shows how changing visions of hell reflect changing Christian circumstances in the ancient world.

Bremmer, Jan N., and István Czachesz, eds. *The Apocalypse of Peter*. Leuven: Peeters, 2003. Essays by leading scholars on the Greek and Coptic apocalypses attributed to Peter.

———. *The Visio Pauli and the Gnostic Apocalypse of Paul*. Leuven: Peeters, 2007. Essays by leading scholars on the two apocalypses attributed to Paul.

Burke, Tony. *Secret Scriptures Revealed: A New Introduction to the Christian Apocrypha*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013. Engaging introduction by one of the leaders in the study of the apocrypha.

———. “‘Social Viewing’ of Children in the Childhood Stories of Jesus.” In *Children in Late Ancient Christianity*, 29–43. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009. Argues that the depiction of the child Jesus in the so-called *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* is idealized, not realistic.

Burrus, Virginia. *Chastity as Autonomy: Women in the Stories of Apocryphal Acts*. Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1987. Argues that stories of Christian women giving up sex with their husbands in the apocryphal acts reflect real women finding autonomy in chastity.

Combs, Jason Robert. “A Walking, Talking Cross: The Polymorphic Christology of the *Gospel of Peter*.” *Early Christianity* 5 (2014): 198–219. Explains the walking, talking cross as a manifestation of Christ’s divinity.

Cooper, Kate. *The Virgin and the Bride: Idealized Womanhood in Late Antiquity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996. Argues that stories of Christian women giving up sex with their husbands in the apocryphal acts reflect not the experiences of real women, but competition between male leaders.

Crossan, John Dominic. *The Cross That Spoke: The Origins of the Passion Narrative*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988. Controversial argument that the *Gospel of Peter* preserves an early source that the New Testament Gospel writers used for the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus.

Davis, Stephen J. *Christ Child: Cultural Memories of a Young Jesus*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014. Outstanding study of the so-called *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*.

———. *The Cult of St. Thecla: A Tradition of Women's Piety in Late Antiquity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. Traces the legends and ritual practices devoted to Thecla through the history of early Christianity.

DeConick, April. "The 'Dialogue of the Savior' and the Mystical Sayings of Jesus." *Vigiliae Christianae* 50 (1996): 178–99. Shows how the *Dialogue of the Savior* draws from and differs from the *Gospel of Thomas*.

Dilley, Paul C. "The Invention of Christian Tradition: 'Apocrypha,' Imperial Policy, and Anti-Jewish Propaganda." *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 50 (2010): 586–615. Studies the continued invention of apocryphal texts after the closure of the New Testament canon.

Ehrman, Bart D. *Forgery and Counterforgery: The Use of Literary Deceit in Early Christian Polemics*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013. Major study of pseudepigraphy (writing under a false name) in early Christian literature.

———. *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003. Explores the early Christian diversity that apocryphal texts reveal.

———. *Lost Scriptures: Books That Did Not Make It into the New Testament*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003. Convenient collection of apocrypha and other works of early Christian literature in translation; some texts given only in excerpts.

Ehrman, Bart D., and Zlatko Pleše. *The Apocryphal Gospels: Texts and Translations*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. Texts of the apocryphal gospels in the ancient languages, along with new English translations, introductions, and bibliographies.

———. *The Other Gospels: Accounts of Jesus outside the New Testament*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. Translations of apocryphal gospels with introductions and bibliographies for students and general readers.

Elliott, J. K. *The Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation Based on M.R. James*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993. Standard collection of apocrypha in English.

Emmel, Stephen. “The Recently Published Gospel of the Savior (‘Unbekanntes Berliner Evangelium’): Righting the Order of Pages and Events.” *Harvard Theological Review* 95 (2002): 45–72. Corrects the order of pages found in Hedrick and Mirecki, *Gospel of the Savior*, and provides an improved English translation.

Fackler, Phillip. “Adversus *Adversus Iudaeos*? Countering Christian Anti-Jewish Polemics in the *Gospel of Nicodemus*.” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 23 (2015): 413–44. Argues that the *Gospel of Nicodemus* opposes anti-Jewish attitudes in the early church.

Foskett, Mary F. *A Virgin Conceived: Mary and Classical Representations of Virginity*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2002. Examination of how Mary is represented as a virgin in the Gospel of Luke, the Acts of the Apostles, and the *Proto-Gospel of James*.

Foster, Paul. *The Gospel of Peter: Introduction, Critical Edition, and Commentary*. Leiden: Brill, 2010. Most comprehensive study of this fragmentary gospel.

Foster, Paul, ed. *The Non-Canonical Gospels*. London: T&T Clark, 2008. Introductory overviews of several apocryphal gospels and related works.

Gregory, Andrew, and Christopher Tuckett, eds. *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Apocrypha*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. Essays by leading scholars on significant categories and themes in the study of the apocrypha.

Hedrick, Charles W., and Paul A. Mirecki. *Gospel of the Savior: A New Ancient Gospel*. Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge Press, 1999. First publication of the Coptic text with English translation; must be used with caution due to incorrect ordering of manuscript pages.

Henning, Meghan. “*Chreia* Elaboration and the Un-Healing of Peter’s Daughter: Rhetorical Analysis as a Clue to Understanding the Development of a Petrine Tradition.” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 24 (2016): 145–171. Shows that a story in the *Acts of Peter* in which Peter paralyzes his own daughter carried a moral lesson.

Hock, Ronald F. *The Infancy Gospels of James and Thomas*. Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge Press, 1995. Greek texts and English translations of the *Proto-Gospel of James* and the so-called *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, along with introductions and notes.

Hutt, Curtis. “‘Be Ye Approved Moneychangers!’ Reexamining the Social Contexts of the Saying and Its Interpretation.” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 131 (2012): 589–609. Questions the traditional assumption that money changers were viewed negatively in antiquity.

Jacobs, Andrew S. "The Disorder of Books: Priscillian's Canonical Defense of Apocrypha." *Harvard Theological Review* 93 (2000): 135–59. Studies the defense of reading apocryphal texts made by Priscillian, a 4th-century Spanish bishop.

Jenott, Lance. *The Gospel of Judas: Coptic Text, Translation, and Historical Interpretation of the "Betrayal's Gospel."* Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011. The best comprehensive study of this controversial recently discovered gospel.

Kelley, Nicole. *Knowledge and Religious Authority in the Pseudo-Clementines.* Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006. The best comprehensive study of the difficult *Pseudo-Clementines*.

King, Karen L. *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala: Jesus and the First Woman Apostle.* Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge Press, 2003. Comprehensive study of the gospel with English translation.

———. *The Secret Revelation of John.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006. Comprehensive study of the *Secret Book of John*, with English translation.

Klauck, Hans-Josef. *Apocryphal Gospels: An Introduction.* London and New York: T&T Clark, 2003. Summaries, brief analyses, and bibliographies about the apocryphal gospels.

———. *The Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles: An Introduction.* Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2008. Summaries, brief analyses, and bibliographies about the apocryphal acts.

Kraemer, Ross Shepard, and Mary Rose D'Angelo, eds. *Women and Christian Origins.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1999. Essays by

leading scholars explore women and gender in New Testament and apocryphal writings.

Lampe, G. W. H. “The Trial of Jesus in the *Acta Pilati*.” In *Jesus and the Politics of His Day*, 173–182. Edited by Ernst Bammel and C.F.D. Moule. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984. Shows how Pilate is presented as a virtual Christian in the *Gospel of Nicodemus*.

Landau, Brent. *Revelation of the Magi: The Lost Tale of the Wise Men’s Journey to Bethlehem*. New York: HarperOne, 2010. English translation with introduction and notes.

Layton, Bentley. *The Gnostic Scriptures*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1987. Excellent translations of Gnostic writings and related texts.

MacDonald, Dennis R. *The Acts of Andrew*. Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge Press, 2005. English translation with introduction and notes.

———. *The Legend and the Apostle: The Battle for Paul in Story and Canon*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983. Highly influential study of the *Acts of Paul* as evidence for conflict over women’s roles in early Christian communities.

Malherbe, Abraham J. “A Physical Description of the Paul.” *Harvard Theological Review* 76 (1986): 170–75. Argues that the description of Paul in the *Acts of Paul* was meant to be idealizing, even if it seems ugly to us.

Markschies, Christoph, and Jens Schröter, eds. *Antike christliche Apokryphen in deutscher Übersetzung. I. Band: Evangelien und Verwandtes*. 2 vols. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck: 2012. German translations of

apocryphal gospels and related texts with outstanding introductions and major essays on the apocrypha and canon.

Meyer, Marvin, ed. *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures: The International Edition*. New York: HarperOne, 2007. Excellent English translations of the Nag Hammadi works, along with related texts like the *Gospel of Mary* and the *Gospel of Judas*.

Osiek, Carolyn. *The Shepherd of Hermas: A Commentary*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1999. Authoritative scholarly translation of and commentary on this major early Christian writing.

Pervo, Richard I. *The Acts of John*. Salem, OR: Polebridge Press, 2016. English translation with introduction and notes.

———. *The Acts of Paul: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014. Most recent comprehensive study of this important text.

Räsänen, Heikki. “Marcion.” In *A Companion to Second-Century Christian “Heretics,”* 100–24. Edited by Antti Marjanen and Petri Luomanen. Leiden: Brill, 2008. Best brief introduction to one of the earliest creators of a collection of Christian scriptures.

Roggema, Barbara. “Biblical Exegesis and Interreligious Polemics in the Arabic *Apocalypse of Peter*—*The Book of the Rolls*.” In *The Bible in Arab Christianity*, 131–50. Edited by D. R. Thomas. Leiden: Brill, 2006. Describes a fascinating medieval apocalypse attributed to Peter that encourages Christians living under Muslim rule.

Schroeder, Caroline T. “Embracing the Erotic in the Passion of Andrew: The Apocryphal *Acts of Andrew*, the Greek Novel, and

Platonic Philosophy.” In *The Apocryphal Acts of Andrew*, 110–26. Edited by Jan N. Bremmer. Leuven: Peeters, 2000. Excellent analysis of the erotic language and imagery in the *Acts of Andrew*.

Shoemaker, Stephen J. *Ancient Traditions of the Virgin Mary's Dormition and Assumption*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002. Authoritative study of apocryphal traditions surrounding the end of Mary's life, with translations of key ancient texts.

———. “Early Christian Apocryphal Literature.” In *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies*, 521–48. Edited by Susan Ashbrook Harvey and David G. Hunter. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. Best brief introduction to apocrypha as a category and to recent trends in scholarly investigation of apocryphal works.

———. *Mary in Early Christian Faith and Devotion*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016. Best introduction to Christian devotion to Mary in the first five centuries.

Skinner, Christopher W. *What Are They Saying about the Gospel of Thomas?* New York: Paulist Press, 2012. Accessible overview of the major questions about the most famous apocryphal gospel.

Smith, Morton. *The Secret Gospel: The Discovery and Interpretation of the Secret Gospel according to Mark*. Middletown, CA: The Dawn Horse Press, 1973. Smith describes his discovery and its significance for students and general readers.

Stoops, Robert F., Jr. *The Acts of Peter*. Salem, OR: Polebridge Press, 2012. English translation with introduction and notes.

Stroker, William D. *Extracanonial Sayings of Jesus*. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989. Most complete collection of agrapha in English.

Tuckett, Christopher. *The Gospel of Mary*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. Critical edition of the Coptic and Greek fragments with translation, introduction, and detailed commentary.

White, Benjamin L. "Reclaiming Paul? Reconfiguration as Reclamation in *3 Corinthians*." *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 17 (2009): 497–523. Shows how the apocryphal *3 Corinthians* makes Paul a defender of orthodoxy while it also changes Paul's view of the resurrection.

Website of the North American Society for the Study of Christian Apocryphal Literature, <http://www.nasscal.com>. Includes *e-Clavis: Christian Apocrypha*, a comprehensive bibliography of research on the apocrypha.